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THE RANCH RAIDERS; or, THE SIEGE OF FORT PURGATORY.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "OLD ROCKY'S BOYBES," "GIANT GEORGE," ETC., ETC.



"WITH A WILD SHRIEK FROM BOTH MUSTANG AND MAID, BOTH SHOT DOWN INTO THE DEPTHS!"

The Ranch Raiders;

OR,

The Siege of Fort Purgatory.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(MAJOR SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "THE FIGHTING TRIO," "CREEPING CAT," "GIANT GEORGE," "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

INTO THE YAWNING CHASM.

THE sun, a massive sphere, of sanguine hue, was slowly sinking in the west; its lower disk seeming almost to touch the rough ridge, known as the Devil's Backbone, in the Blanco Hills, Texas.

Crag, gorge, and rift, bluff, boulder, and hill-side, were gorgeously painted by the god of day; soon, however, to be rendered most dismal, desolate, and forbidding, by the shades of night.

That particular portion of country, most overgrown with trees and dense thickets, situated west of the Blanco Falls, and called Purgatory, seemed so brightly illumined by the setting sun, as to have been misnamed. It looked a veritable paradise.

A very peculiar cluster of elevations are the Blanco Hills; in some places, long parallel ridges, rough, rugged, and almost bare of verdure—in others, grass-grown hills, and mounds of circular form, with beautiful valleys between. This is considered very favorable grazing ground for sheep; a fact which had been taken advantage of, in this connection, by some few settlers in *ante bellum* days, the time of which our narrative treats.

Between some of the elevations, there was but a narrow passage leading from valley to valley, and bordered by thickets, which, in many instances, extended some distance up the sides of the hills; paths, that had been worn by wild beasts, winding along from north and south to the Blanco river. This was, here, a veritable mountain stream, boiling, hissing, and roaring, amid huge boulders; at one point, making a grand plunge over a perpendicular rock-wall some forty feet in height, forming a boiling basin of fully half that depth.

This is known as the Blanco Falls, and the banks that overhang the basin below them are of solid rock, and on a level with the surface of the stream above, where the waters make their mad plunge into the depths.

Consequently, when one stands on the even rock platform, twenty yards below the falls, he is the same distance from the surface of the water in the basin far beneath, as he would be, if standing at the very point where the stream shoots over, a sheet of foam, from its adamant-tine bed.

Hence, it will be seen, that the river, below the falls, dashes eastward, afar down from the general level of the country; in fact, along the bed of a rocky canyon.

On the north side of the falls, the rock-bank is nearly level, and for some yards without verdure, or whatever there is, being much scattered; but, as soon as you pass from the river, this becomes thick and rank, and then come low bushes, which extend up the sides of the elevations.

One can get quite an extended view, up the stream, and between the hills, as far as the ridge called the Devil's Backbone, which forms a background for Purgatory, as one stands at the falls.

Down-stream, also, the view is open for some distance, but southerly and northerly, hills, rocks and crags bar all view beyond.

At the particular time we wish to hold the attention of the reader, the scene westward from the Blanco Falls was most grand and beautiful; only made so, however, by the ruddy light, which was most brilliant, of the declining sun.

In a cloudy day, or by twilight, this same view would have been cold and depressive to a beholder; in fact, barren of all beauty, and dismal in the extreme. And not a little, did the sullen roar of the mad waters, at the falls, add to the depressing influence of the vista, as beheld by moonlight, or under a sullen sky.

We therefore, prefer inviting the reader's attention to the scene, when it is at its best.

It was at this time, that down toward the falls, along a bush-bordered path between two hills, came a young maiden, mounted upon a glossy black half-breed horse; the animal held in check by the fair rider, but with some diffi-

culty, for it was of a fiery nature, and impatient at being restrained.

At quite a slow gallop, the horse approached the river; the sound of the falls causing the beast to toss its head, and gaze forward with a wild expression, not devoid of fright. The animal was a beauty; well-proportioned, clean limbed, and with arching neck, and flowing, wavy mane and tail.

But, although an observer would have, at once, been struck with the graceful action of the steed, and its symmetrical beauty, all thought of it would have been banished at first sight of the rider.

Most lovely, indeed, was the young maiden; and, she sat her saddle, and controlled her horse with a grace and skill that were unrivaled.

Not more than sixteen years, did she seem to have seen, and her form was of medium height and perfectly developed. Rosy were her cheeks, her eyes large and very dark blue, almost black, as were her abundant, free-hanging tresses, and her long lashes. Her mouth was small and well-formed, her nose Grecian in type, and her small ears shell-like in shape and tint.

She was attired in a riding habit of gray mixed homespun, thinly woven; the basque tight fitting, and revealing well her symmetrical form.

A wide-brimmed hat of straw, decorated with natural flowers, one side looped upward, sat jauntily upon her well-formed head; and, upon her small hands, she wore gauntlet gloves. A riding-whip was clutched with the reins in her left hand, her right being held over her brows outspread, to shield her eyes partly from the glare of the sun, while she gazed westward; strong admiration and pleasure being expressed in face and eye.

Taken altogether, maid and mustang formed a most beautiful picture, at this particular time; befitting central figures in the gorgeous vista, which any one standing east of the falls, would have been enraptured to contemplate.

Nothing animate was visible, except a few slow circling buzzards, mere specks in the fiery sky, and the usual twittering small birds that were seeking shelter for the night.

But, although there were no living objects to be seen, there were most certainly coverts, hiding-places, for ten thousand savage beasts and more savage men. At the base of the two elevations, from between which the fair rider had appeared, the thickets were dense, and of sufficient height to screen horsemen, did they but bend slightly in their saddles. But, there were no habitations, no corrals, and no trace of that great weapon of civilization, the woodman's ax.

It is true, that, on the border of the belt of thickets, at a convenient distance from the stream, there were to be seen, here and there, amid the grass, several circular grayish spots, dotted with black, and plainly indicating the ashes of old camp-fires; but who could determine whether red, or white men, had there rested and feasted?

However, at the time of which we speak, any borderman, upon approaching a favorable place for camping, on any section of the frontier, would reconnoiter the locality with caution, and continue watchful while encamped; as other parties, perhaps hostile to him, might at any time approach the point for the same purpose as himself.

Not the slightest hesitation marked the advance of the maiden toward the Blanco Falls, however, if we except the curbing of her horse, for the purpose of admiring and studying the beautiful vista toward the west.

Not the slightest apprehension was shown upon her face, or in glance of eye; naught except admiration for the view, which seemed to absorb her whole attention. This revealed the fact, that she was possessed of artistic taste, and was an ardent admirer of nature.

Her repudiation of the dismal sound from the falls, also implied that this was not her first visit to the spot; indeed, one would at once decide that the young girl, judging from her manner and actions, was riding up to a favorite haunt.

Had she but looked backward, toward the thickets at the base of the hills, from between which she had but just emerged, the expression upon her fair features would have changed to the extreme of anxiety and terror; for she had not proceeded twenty yards from the point, where the path at the base of the elevations branched into numerous trails, that led through the bushes both up and down-stream—when, not twenty paces from that path, above the bush-tops arose two hideous, paint-daubed faces, filled with hatred and triumph!

These were two Comanche braves; the peculiar manner, in which the war-paint was laid on their repulsive faces, would have proved this fact to any borderman. But, a more noticeable one attracted attention, which indicated not only the tribe to which they belonged, but the particular branch of it: their hair had been parted from the center of their foreheads, over the crown, to the back of the neck, and all of it, on the left side of the cranium had been plucked out, leaving just one-half, the head entirely bare, but painted blood red, with vermilion!

The hair, on the right side, was coarse and black as midnight; hanging free and wild over their shoulders, to the cantle of their saddles. It was platted only at the head for a few inches, to prevent it from flying forward, and thus impeding their sight and movements.

Stripes of vermilion, yellow ocher, white gypsum, and narrow lines of black pigment across brow, and up and down cheeks, breast and arms, gave to these two savages, a most hideous and unearthly appearance.

They were armed with bows and arrows, as well as with long scalping-knives, and the butts of their lances were held between their thighs and the saddles; the long shafts and steel points projecting over, and beyond the croups of their half-wild mustangs.

Tiny silver trinkets glittered from the meshes of their ebon hair, while lances, shields, and jaw-straps were decorated with human scalps.

Secured to their long hair, and hanging loosely with the same, were numerous feathers, dyed red, each representing an enemy, that had been killed on the war-path. These had been removed from the conspicuous place in their fillets of beadwork, from the fact, that such brilliant and suggestive ornaments would attract attention from afar.

Even the mustangs were daubed with stripes of vermilion and white gypsum, and their manes and tails were decorated with the teeth and other trophies of animals slain in the chase.

Had not the roar of the falls drowned all lesser sounds, the maiden must have heard the cracking of bushes, as the fiery mustangs pranced and tore through them from around the west of the hill toward the east—the way in which the young girl had approached the falls.

Not until the fair rider had reached a point half-way between the base of the hills and the Rio Blanco chasm—not until then, did these two fiendish braves raise themselves erect in their saddles.

Again, had they known the sex of the rider, they would not have practiced the caution to get a fair view of the beautiful girl, and her splendid horse. Instantly each loosened a lasso from his saddle, coiling and adjusting the nooses; then with jaw-straps held tight, they made ready to dash upon the unsuspecting maiden.

Each darted, from his snake-like black eyes, a significant signaling look into the orbs of the other; then, out from their throats, shot their horrible, blood-curdling war-whoops. At the same instant, both mustangs, with wild snorts, bounded, crashing from the undergrowth, toward their intended victim.

The latter sat her horse, dazed and speechless with fear and horror. For but an instant, for with a terrific snort, the animal she rode, turned toward the hills, whirled on its hinder hoofs, as on a pivot, and plunged, madly and frantically, from the yelling demons in its rear.

So frenzied was the beast, that it plunged, at terrific speed, directly over the level rock, toward the chasm, into which but a short distance above, dashed the mad waters, with a roar like continuous thunder! and so great was the momentum of the horse, that when it beheld what was before it, it had not the power to halt and save itself, and, with a wild shriek from both mustang and maid, both shot down over the rocky shelf, into the dark depths. Horse and rider disappeared beneath the inky waters, as the two warriors, with lasso in hand, dashed up to the brink, and gazed downward in amazement not unmixed with dread; the blood-red sun flooding them in its light, giving them the appearance of demons.

But far below them the beautiful maiden had disappeared from their view, and all in that direction was dark as death—ominous of death, in sight and sound.

CHAPTER II.

BIG BEAR AND RED FOX.

At the moment the two Comanche braves dashed from their coverts toward the appalled maiden, a young man, mounted upon a magnifi-

cent jet-black horse, dashed around the eastern base of one of the elevations.

In all probability the Indians had come from the northwest, the young man from the northeast, while the course of the maiden had been from north to south—the Blanco Falls being the objective point of all—each party undoubtedly having been unconscious of the presence of other human beings than themselves.

Thus it was that, in a most singular manner, the fates had decreed a meeting between the savages and the young girl, which should be most disastrous to her, and at the same time had directed one toward her, in her hour of most deadly peril and need, who would fill her soul with gratitude, which was destined to merge into undying love.

And never was maiden more in need of a rescuer from a death which, though she escaped through the efforts of the red demons, yet the fright occasioned by them had caused that terrible plunge into the dark chasm and boiling waters, which threatened to have but one ending.

But to the new-comer, who arrived so opportunely upon the scene.

He was a young man, perhaps twenty years of age, a little above medium height, and of symmetrical form, well knit and muscular, and at the same time full of fire and vim. This his manner and actions proved, as he caught a view of the startling and most impressive scene before him.

His face was handsome, his brow high, his nose aquiline, and his eyes dark brown. His chin and mouth, though partly hidden by a goatee and mustache of silky hair, expressed a daring and determination verging upon recklessness.

Long, dark-brown hair, in wavy masses, hung low upon his shoulders, and his skin was tanned by the sun, proving, as did other things which will be mentioned, that he was one who was accustomed to prairie roaming and camp life.

A blue woolen overshirt, with wide, flowing collar, the same loosely confined by a black kerchief, buckskin breeches, fringed down the outer seams and thrust into the tops of spurred cavalry boots, made up his costume, if we mention a black felt sombrero with a wide brim, somewhat jauntily worn.

Belted about his waist were a brace of Colt's army-size six-shooters, and a bowie-knife; while a five-shooter carbine of the same make, hung in close companionship with his lasso, and the neck-rope of his horse, by a loop at his saddlehorn.

Bridle and saddle were models of fine workmanship, and were both ornamented with silver filagree-work on their trimmings of stamped leather.

His entire outfit proved that the young man was prepared for long or short trail, rain or shine, night or day. His black steed was a typical Texan frontier roamer, evidently a cross between a Spanish mare and a mustang stud, having the better qualities of both stocks; built for speed and endurance, and a perfect specimen of equine beauty.

Man and mustang presented a fine picture, and one that would have attracted notice and admiration, even on the plazas of San Antonio de Bexar.

As the steed dashed around the base of the hill, startled by the roar of the falls, and then by the spectacle that burst upon its view and that of its rider, the blood-curdling war-whoop of the two Comanche braves burst on the ears of both, distinct and above the mad rush of the waters.

Instantly the stranger jerked his horse to haunches, and thus both stood motionless, and as if suddenly transformed to stone. And no wonder was it, that, as they dashed from comparative silence, with nothing animate within view, and expecting nothing—no wonder that the startling spectacle, and the horrible war-whoops, completely dumfounded them.

Such a sudden transformation in sight and sound was truly terrific; but the young Texan was well used to astonishing surprises, as his whole deportment proved. His thoughts flew like lightning, and his acts were equally instantaneous.

He saw a beautiful young girl, sitting in her saddle, terrified and pale as a corpse, while toward her, from the thicket, thundered the two Comanches, yelling like fiends!

For but an instant. Then the mustang of the maiden whirled about, and dashed headlong toward the chasm; and, before the horrified young man could even call out—knowing, as he did, the danger ahead—over plunged both maiden and mustang into the dark depths!

Even the hideous Comanches seemed appalled by the unexpected termination and consequences of their cowardly charge. They dropped to their sides the lassoes, which had been circling their heads, and on the eve of being cast, as their intended captive shot from view, over and into the swirling waters, far down in the bed of the yawning black canyon!

So astounded were the savages, that they gazed downward, spell-bound, leaning over the necks of their animals, the fore-hoofs of which were planted upon the very verge of the rocky platform; and the red braves heard not the clatter of the galloping horse until he was close upon them.

So sudden and unlooked for had been the dash into the abyss that, as has been mentioned, the red braves were themselves almost petrified; and no less were they dumfounded when, up in their rear, clattered the black horse.

Instinctively, the warriors half-whirled their mustangs and clutched bows and arrows; but, before the feathered shafts could be fitted, the young Texan sprung from his horse, bounded to the verge of the rock-shelf, and shading his eyes from the sun with his hand, peered down into the depths.

The next moment, down into the chasm, disappearing in the mad waters, plunged the daring Texan, without giving any attention to the red warriors, after the first vengeful flash of eye, which spoke more to the point than the loudest words.

As he sprung from his horse, however, he uttered a singular cry, and threw the reins over the horn of the saddle. The animal instantly darted away on the back trail, disappearing soon after its master made the plunge into the depths of the chasm.

To picture or describe the astonishment of the two Comanches would be impossible.

So unexpected and unaccountable had everything been that they remained incapable of action, until too late; each gazing into the eyes of the other, as the young Texan disappeared from their view.

Soon, however, the spell was broken by a guttural ejaculation.

"Ugh!" burst from one.

"Ugh!" echoed the other.

"Heap good squaw," said the first.

"Squaw gone," returned the second; "white brave gone—black horse gone. No horse, no scalp, no captive for torture-stake. Heap bad! Red Fox, he squaw—no warrior. Big Bear, he squaw—no warrior. Ugh!"

"Ugh!" again echoed the other in agreement and self-condemnation.

Suddenly Red Fox lashed his mustang madly, the animal rearing and plunging upon the rocky level. Then he yelled to his comrade:

"Come! Waugh! Red Fox has sounded war-cry. Must have horse—must have scalp!"

"Good! Red Fox talk heap good. Big Bear on war-trail. Must have horse—must have scalp."

"Let my brother ride fast. Ugh! The squaws will point at us and laugh. Our belts must hang heavy with Texan scalps. It is good. Come!"

And both braves dashed around the hill on the trail of the young Texan's black steed; but soon galloped back without the animal, furious with rage and disappointment, and lashing their animals mercilessly.

Straight to the brink of the chasm they forced their mustangs, the beasts rendered frantic by the cruel quirts of their red masters and the thunderous roar of the falls. Springing from their saddles the two Comanches, retaining the slack of the jaw-straps, stood upon the edge of the chasm and peered downward, their bows in hand and arrows between their fingers.

For a full minute they gazed thus.

Naught except the waters met their view.

"Ugh!" burst from the throat of Big Bear.

"Ugh!" echoed Red Fox, his black eyes flashing with baffled rage and vengeful fury.

But the surprises of the waning day were not at an end. Slowly up the side of the chasm, within a few feet of the falls, climbed the young Texan, the senseless form of the maiden in the grasp of his right arm, and both hidden from the view of the two braves by a curve in the overhanging cliff.

He reached a point near the top of the chasm, placed the young girl in a comfortable position in a niche of the rock wall, and, looking up, caught a glimpse of the mustangs of the Indians but a few yards from his position.

"Now for revenge," he muttered. "Lucky I rubbed grease over the caps and nipples of my 'sixes' or they might not work just now. Here's a try for it any way!"

As the young man spoke he got a foothold higher up, sprung upon the rock level, threw up his pistol and pulled the trigger.

With the quickness of thought the weapon was again discharged, the last report blending with a terrific yell from the first brave.

Then from the throat of the other came a half howl.

Both Big Bear and Red Fox, as the startling reports sounded, sprung erect, their bows and arrows dropping from their hands and their arms wildly beating the air. Then both fell forward, shooting down into the darkness and plunging into the mad, swirling waters beneath the Blanco Falls.

As the young Texan pulled trigger the last time the mustangs of the Indians dashed away to the westward up the stream. The next moment the young man and his fair charge, both dripping with water, stood upon the level.

"Thank God! she is saved—she lives!" he said as he placed his ear to her breast.

"She is saved and avenged as well! But I must light out from here, and lively, for those reds are not on the war-path alone."

Scarcely had he spoken when there sounded from the West, toward Purgatory, fierce whoops and rallying yells, and the young Texan knew that the reports of his revolver had been heard by the war-party, to which the two braves belonged.

This did not surprise him, as he had reasoned that a body of Indians must be in the vicinity. Still he was filled with anxiety on account of his unconscious charge.

He listened again, and soon heard the galloping hoofs of a horse, quickly followed by his own black steed.

"Hurrah for us, Negro! We have won the game! You will be forced to carry double this trip, but we must make it. We have a long and rapid run ahead."

Scarcely had the young man said this, when he was mounted, and taking the maiden in his arms, gave a whistle, and away dashed Negro toward the base of the hill. Then the young Texan gazed westward.

Two rifle-shots in distance from the falls, dashing at terrific speed, their lance-points glittering in the farewell rays of the sun—on came a horde of Comanche braves; feathers and hair flaunting, and quirts flying about their heads.

Whoops of vengeful exultation burst from the red demons at every bound of their mustangs.

"On, Negro! On! Life and death for this maiden and myself depend upon you, my noble black! On, Negro! On!"

Thus yelled the young Texan, as he spurred around the base of the hill.

CHAPTER III.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

MOST impressive, indeed, was the last westward view that was presented to the eye of the daring rescuer of the maiden, as he gazed back.

But a slight portion of the upper disk of the blood red sun was now visible above the Devil's Backbone; fiery rays shooting upward toward the zenith, and out over Purgatory. Thus it was, when the horde of war-painted Indians dashed up, in a mad mob, on their half-wild mustangs.

Then, most forcibly were the names of the locations to the westward brought to the young Texan's mind, as most appropriate; especially for this particular occasion.

No more infernal scene could well be imagined, when the Comanches and their merciless character and hideousness, were taken into consideration.

But, undaunted by the dread sights and sounds, the Texan dashed onward; his aim being to escape to a safe distance, and then attempt the restoration of the young girl, who had, in so singular a manner, fallen under his protection.

Until she should recover, and inform him where her home was, he could do nothing; for he knew of no ranch in the near vicinity. Indeed, he had thought it passing strange that a young girl should be in such a wild place, and surrounded by such dangers without a protector.

This was somewhat mysterious to him, and his anxiety in regard to the continued senseless condition of the maiden was great; he feeling deep concern, fearing she might have received some internal injury.

When the young Texan had peered over the rocky verge of the chasm, into the waters nearly forty feet below, he discovered, most providential-

ly, at that very instant, the corpse-like face of the maiden, as her form was thrown up by the boiling waters; and he also saw the horse some distance below, thus being enabled to dive downward without danger of striking either the maid or mustang. Had he done this, it would doubtless have either killed him instantly, or broken some of his bones, thus causing him to be powerless to swim.

Of course he would, in that case, have been drowned, without having accomplished any good.

It had been a risky dive, and required great presence of mind and a knowledge of the art.

Had he not plunged in a straight course, keeping his form perfectly straight—had he bent in a curve either forward or backward, or struck the water in any way except by plunging headlong, or feet first, it would have been certain death.

Head-first he had gone down, keeping his hands together pointed downward, also to shield his head; and afar down into the depths he had gone—so far, that, before he reached the surface, ten thousand brilliant lights had seemed to flash in his eyes, and his ears had been filled with strange sounds, like the ringing of a thousand bells.

Had he struck a rock, even far below the surface, or had the basin proved less in depth, or of a muddy bottom, death would have been the consequence, but, providentially, he struck at a favorable point, and when he arose from the depths—he having borne in mind the location of the maiden, and striven to swim under water to her vicinity—to his joy, he clutched the skirt of her dress.

Fortunately, he had arisen within the influence of a current, that had whirled him directly under the overhanging cliff, and back toward the falls; and as he retained firm hold of the garments of the young girl he was soon enabled to bear her from the waters; grasping as he did at once, a rock which had fallen from above, and climbing upon it with his fair burden.

A hasty scramble, and an inspection of the walls above him, had enabled the rescuer to decide at once upon scaling them. Indeed this was his one chance of escape from the chasm.

He had felt greatly rejoiced; for, as he could determine, from clasping the maiden in his arms, he believed that no bones had been broken—that her form was unmarred and unhurt.

Her horse had been instantly killed, and from this fact, the fair rider had been preserved from death; the prospect of life, with her horse struggling and plunging, would have been but gloomy.

That the young Texan reached the level, shot the Comanches, and, to his further joy and relief, ascertained that the maiden lived—all this the reader knows; and it now remains for us to follow the handsome pair, brought thus together so strangely, and amid dangers which thus far have been successfully combated against. He has saved the life of one into whose eyes he has never yet gazed, and whose voice he has never heard!

He has saved her from death in the waters, and from death or capture by the red demons; and now both her life and his own are in danger from the yelling horde of war-painted Comanches, who have seen the mustangs of their comrades who have been slain, and are frantic for revenge!

Not for an instant, however, does the young Texan doubt his ability to avoid the Indians, and save his fair charge from a fate worse than death.

The chain of favoring incidents, which have thus far enabled him to save her, he feels will continue on.

So unlooked-for, so undreamed-of and startling, have been the occurrences, so timely and providential his arrival at the falls, and so flattering his success thus far, that, as he gazes into the sweet pale face so near his own, he believes it had been all predestined; it was to be that they should meet, and meet as they had thus met. The Fates had decreed that they two must be thus brought together; their hopes, and love, and life, being henceforth wrapped up in, or dependent upon, each other until death.

At the first glimpse he had of the angelic maiden as she sat her horse, appalled by the Comanche demons, the young Texan had felt that he had met his fate. He had been, in a most mysterious way, led or impelled to camp at the Blanco Falls, and each succeeding event had strengthened his belief in this connection until now no doubt remained.

In the strength born of such an assurance, he now felt that he could whirl his horse and

charge through the fiendish cavalcade in his rear, hurling them to the earth with his one arm, while she, for whom he fought, lay limp and senseless in the other.

When beyond the hill, the young Texan dashed into a dense growth of trees and bushes, the trees, although small, being of sufficient height to shield him from the view of his red pursuers; and, as it was impossible to pass through the dense mass of vegetation except by the narrow paths made by wild animals, the Indians were at a great disadvantage. This forced them to proceed in single file and, after penetrating some distance, to dismount and ascertain which of the branching trails had been taken by the daring white man.

This occasioned much delay and added to the vengeful fury of the Indians, it being difficult to discover the "sign" in the dim twilight of the wood.

As the sun had now sunk below Devil's Backbone, the Comanches knew that, did they not capture the Texan and the maiden within a very short time, they would escape under cover of night.

Conscious that while they remained together they would not be so likely to succeed in their object, the infuriated horde now scattered, parties proceeding by every branching path, the chief and half a dozen braves keeping on the main trail.

They knew that the two warriors, their advance spies, had been slain, for blood was upon the saddles when the mustangs galloped back to the war-party. But the presence of the white maiden, and the circumstances connected with the killing of the two braves, was a mystery to them.

A systematic search was at once instituted—the keen eyes of the savages piercing the shades, their heads being above the tops of the undergrowth. They were thus able to distinguish objects, especially if in motion, for some distance, between the lower branches of the trees and the bushes.

Little chance seemed there for the escape of the young Texan with his fair charge, and he realized this; for he made halt to listen, and although the Indians had ceased their yells and whoops, he quickly detected the whisking of bushes in a widely-extended curve in his rear. This proved to him that the Indians had spread, and if clear ground was reached they would be enabled to surround him.

Had the young girl been conscious and able to inform him as to the direction of her home, he would not have been at a loss as to the course he must pursue.

As matters stood, he resolved to gain time by strategy; and, through the speed of his horse, gain a position in the rear of his foes, by circling the wood at once in an easterly course.

Shielding the fair girl as much as was possible, he drove spurs, and shot forward at terrific speed; soon, as he had calculated, reaching a belt of low bushes that bordered the wood, beyond which arose a chain of hills. Those, however, afforded no shelter.

On toward the east he dashed for at least a mile, circling southward; and soon after reached the Rio Blanco, at a point below the falls—the scene of the recent startling events.

The young Texan had accomplished his purpose and gained a position in the rear of the savages, where they would not be liable to search for, or suspect his presence.

Darting into the thickets that bordered the Blanco, the banks of the river being at this point much less precipitous, the young man dismounted with great care; and, taking the maiden from the horse, he strove, by every means in his power, to revive her.

Luckily the terror and horror produced by the dread sights and sounds and her awful peril as her horse plunged over into the dark abyss—as she had believed, to certain death—had caused her to lose all sense, and thus prevented her from drawing into her lungs any great amount of water.

Consequently, by chafing her hands and administering a dose of brandy, which he procured from his saddle-bags, our hero soon had the satisfaction of seeing the fair girl open her eyes.

She stared at her preserver, in an uncertain and amazed manner, most profoundly astonished, when she realized that she was in the wild wood, and with a stranger.

Instantly she arose to a sitting posture, and, at that very moment the evening air resounded with yells and whoops of baffled rage and fury from the savages, who had scoured the wood without gaining a view of their intended captives.

The maiden shuddered with horror; all the near past, in its horrible signification, being at once, and most vividly, recalled to her mind.

"Fear not," said the young Texan, quickly, and in an assuring voice. "You are in no danger at present. I will protect you with my latest breath. We have escaped the red fiends thus far, and I am rejoiced to see you once again in a conscious state; for I have been very anxious and much concerned on your account."

"It was a fearful plunge that your horse made with you over into the chasm; but you were mercifully preserved from death, and even injury."

"And you saved me? I owe my life to you?"

This, the young girl cried out, questioning; but her actions proved that she was confident he had been her preserver, for she impulsively grasped the hand of the young Texan.

"Thank Heaven, yes! I was providentially led to your rescue, just in time. But, let us not speak of this. Night draws on, and we are encompassed by dangers."

"Where, in the name of wonder, is your home? Why do I find you alone in this wild place? Did you drop from the skies? I almost believe it."

"I would thank you if I could," said the fair girl, with much feeling in her tones.

"I did not drop from the skies. My name is Stella—Stella Saunders—and my home, my father's ranch, is but two miles north from Blanco Falls."

"I rode there to view the beautiful sunset, as I have done on many previous occasions; but little dreaming that I would be so terrified, and have my life endangered by savages."

"Oh, how horrible they were! May Heaven bless you, for your never to be forgotten services to me!"

"Miss Saunders—Stella, if I may thus familiarly address you—I shall never have reason to look back upon this day, with aught but feelings of happiness, and thankfulness as well. I have met one, so fair and lovely, that to have been permitted to be of service to her is the one grand and most gratifying event of my life."

"My name is Carlos Cunningham—at your service, Miss Stella Saunders, as long as life lasts!"

So impressed was the young woman as she gazed upon her handsome and graceful rescuer, and listened to his earnest and meaning words, catching, at the same time, the gaze of his piercing eyes, that mirrored the admiration and sincere devotion which he felt, that she could think of nothing but the great service he had rendered her.

He had risked his life for her, and, as his deep and musical voice sounded in her ears, in consonance with his look and mien, all maidenly reserve was banished. Feeling that more than life might yet depend upon his daring skill and devotion to her, she said, in a low sweet voice, as the tears flowed from her eyes:

"Oh, Carlos, you have proved yourself my friend. Save me, now, from those demons. You will—I know you will! Where is my horse? Can we not escape to my father's ranch? My dear parents will be wild with anxiety at my protracted absence!"

"Your horse is dead, Stella; it was killed. But mine, I sincerely hope and pray, will carry us both to safety. Trust to me; and remain perfectly still. Make no outcry, even though you should see a red brave approaching us!"

Stella was fated to be tried, in this respect, at once; for, hardly had the words left the lips of Carlos Cunningham, when, into the thicket plunged a mustang, upon which was a paint-daubed warrior!

The next instant, Carlos and the Comanche were engaged in deadly conflict; the former having sprung at once, clutched the savage by the throat, and jerked him to the earth.

Stella Saunders stood, appalled, and speechless!

CHAPTER IV.

NOT OUT OF THE WOODS.

INSTANTLY upon the dashing of the Comanche into the thicket, directly to the point where Carlos and Stella were secreted, it occurred to the former that the warrior was one who had been ordered by the chief to search for the two slain braves; and that, therefore, he was not accompanied by others of his comrades.

From this reasoning, the young man was far from being as deeply concerned as he otherwise would have been; but he realized fully the danger that the coming of the savage would bring upon his fair companion. His services, he could see, were regarded by the maiden, with actual adoration.

Should he now succeed in slaying this red intruder, without allowing the savage to utter his death-whoop, all would be well; else there was every reason to fear that all would be lost—that he would be butchered, and Stella borne away to a fate, the bare thought of which caused even the hardy prairie wanderer, to shudder with horror. These thoughts came into the mind of the young Texan, the moment the Comanche plunged into the thicket.

Carlos had the advantage, from the fact that he had become accustomed to the semi-darkness of the covert; while the Indian, coming from the clear belt beyond, could not at once distinguish either man, maiden, or horse, although almost directly upon them.

Not only this, but the warrior, it was probable, dreamed not of the presence of enemies at that point; from the fact that it would seem madness for the Texan to return thither. Besides, it would seem a feat impossible of accomplishment; for such a movement would necessitate a reckless dash through the cordon of red braves.

The utter bewilderment which appeared to paralyze the Comanche, and render him incapable, for the moment, of self-defense, proved that the conclusions of Carlos were correct.

Like a famished panther springing upon its prey, the Texan clutched the savage by the throat, and jerked him, with a strength, born of fury and thoughts of the fate of Stella, should he not succeed, to the earth, even before drawing his weapon.

Knowing that he could only use his knife, that the report of his revolver would draw all the war-party down to the Blanco, Carlos crushed by a herculean effort the brave to the earth, and pounced upon him; retaining a vise-like grip upon the throat of the squirming and writhing Indian.

All, everything—hope, love, and life—depended upon the moment; a moment when Carlos, although dreadfully agonized in regard to Stella, fearing she would faint, or shriek out, and thus betray their presence to their merciless foes, dared not, for an instant, glance in the direction of the maiden—could not, for his life, speak; so intense were his attention, and all his muscular strength and skill brought to the front in his terrible exertions to prevent the brave from writhing from under him, and to maintain his grip about the throat of the savage, upon which so much depended.

Greatly at a disadvantage did it place Carlos Cunningham, to keep one hand upon the throat of his adversary, notwithstanding that the young man held the upper position in the conflict. Only momentarily was the Comanche rendered powerless, by the suddenness of the attack. Then his sinewy arms shot upward, and clutched the scout with a grip of iron, both panting with fury and exertion.

Fortunately for Carlos, the Indian had not had time to draw his knife, or the young Texan would have been at once pierced to the heart, from the fact that the latter was forced to use both hands to keep his foe beneath him and prevent the dreaded warning or danger-whoop being given.

But once did Carlos strive to clutch his knife. Then, before he had accomplished his purpose, he was very nearly hurled from his red antagonist, and was obliged to abandon the attempt. Again he had to hold the right arm of the savage to prevent him from drawing his blade.

For the first moment after the darting of the young scout upon the brave, Stella stood as if transformed to stone; her lips apart, her eyes staring in horror upon the dread scene, and her fair face the pallor of death. Then she became anguished to the very soul; all fear for her personal safety being overbalanced by the torturing anxiety which ruled her in regard to the deadly danger of the noble and self-sacrificing young man, whose life was in peril through his exertions to save her from being captured.

These overpowering feelings banished her personal terrors, and caused her to resolve to do all in her power to prevent the Indian from injuring Carlos, her preserver. These were strange feelings to herself, and unaccountable, unless born of the love that had in a very few moments seemed to take possession of her whole being.

Every glance of eye and word of mouth, every movement, poise of form, gesture and expression of Carlos Cunningham, seemed the very acme of grace, honor, nobleness and sincerity—in short, of manly perfection.

Carlos was a superior type of humanity to any whom the maiden had ever met previously, and she owed to him more than life; but now his own life was imperiled in her service, and

indeed there seemed no hope for him, as he could use but one arm, while the hideous, painted brave could use both, should he so choose.

Should she stand idly by and witness the brutal murder of the brave scout before her eyes?

Must she remain inactive, when the possession of his knife would perhaps insure him victory?

Stella at once divined the reason why Carlos maintained his clutch so persistently on the Indian's throat, and she well knew that the safety, the lives of both depended upon his keeping that grip, for she recalled his caution in regard to her not making any outcry, should she become startled by the sudden appearance of a Comanche brave.

She had heeded that warning, and now realized that the same danger of discovery would exist, did the Indian yell to his comrade-braves.

All this flashed through Stella's mind the moment that she threw off the appalling fright engendered by the crash of the warrior into the thicket, and she braced herself, with clasped hands in front of her, bringing forward all her strength of will, to crush down her fears for herself; concentrating her sense and strength to plan and act to favor the heroic young Texan who, but a few minutes previous, was unknown to her by name or reputation.

Now she knew that, not only did she owe to him her life, but that she loved him with all her heart! Yes—and he loved her! He had proven his love and his noble and brave character before one word had passed between them!

The teeth of the young girl were now set with daring determination, her bright eyes fixed upon, and watching the slightest movement of the struggling pair. Thus stood Stella Saunders, ready to take advantage of any opportunity, however slight, to assist Carlos Cunningham, even did she peril her own life in the attempt.

The Comanche was a muscular brave, and the young scout was forced to strain every muscle, and exert all his great strength, to maintain his position, astride of the writhing warrior.

Thus far—that is, to the moment of the maiden's firm resolution to assist Carlos—the brave had been so agonized by the grip upon his throat, and the weight of his white adversary upon his body, that he had been compelled to use both arms, and all his immense strength, doubled by the desperate nature of his position, in an endeavor to force the scout from him. He could then gain the advantage, by bounding on him, or writhing free, and hurling his foe to the earth, thus reversing their positions.

This attempt proving futile, the warrior lay for a moment, as passive as was possible in his agony; his black eyes shooting glances of most murderous and vengeful hatred into the orbs of his white foe.

Not until that instant did the brave perceive that, although situated as he was, he held the advantage; inasmuch as he could draw his knife, while his enemy's both hands were forced to be engaged in clutching his throat, and holding his right arm outstretched upon the earth.

As this flashed upon the mind of the Comanche, he quickly acted in accordance; but the keen eyes of Stella read his mind and act, and she sprung forward, just as the brave thrust his left hand to his side, and caught the handle of his long scalping-knife.

Grasping the sombrero from the head of Carlos, the young girl cast it in the face of the brave; while, at the same instant, she drew the bowie from the belt of the scout, and thrust the buckhorn handle between the fingers of the hand that clutched the right arm of the Indian. Carlos at once understood her object, and slightly loosened his grip to inclose the knife within his grasp.

Just then, out from the belt of the Comanche flashed the blade of the latter, and the scout knew that his life hung upon a hair—that either he must relinquish his hold upon the throat of his red foe, thus periling the maiden, now dearer to him than life, or else receive a thrust from the Indian, which would, without doubt, end his career.

In either event Stella was equally in danger; or perhaps it would be more favorable to allow a death, or danger-yell, than to risk the scalping-knife. Even did the young Texan relinquish his hold, and the war-party be summoned by the whoop of the brave, there yet would remain a chance for escape; while, did the Indian thrust the knife into his breast, his life would

be forfeited, and Stella would be in the power of the pitiless savage.

Instantly did Carlos thus reason, and as instantly did he act. Bounding to his feet, and letting loose his hand from the throat of the brave, he stood before Stella, as a low cry of horror came from the maiden's lips.

The hideous, painted warrior, his face contorted with vengeful fury, and his long knife in his hand, sprung erect, in front of Carlos; gasping, and almost choking for breath. The form of the brave was convulsed with his superhuman efforts to regain his breath, and give the loud danger signal.

Electric-like were the movements of the scout at that moment. He at once saw, that it was then in his power, not only to conquer, but to prevent the yell of warning.

With one rapid and powerful stroke, Carlos severed the muscles of the Indian's knife wrist, then, closing in with the brave, he clutched him by the long hair, forcing his head back, and the next instant drove his bowie blade through the throat of his red antagonist.

With a convulsive tremor, and a horrible sound issuing from his severed wind pipe, the Comanche threw up his arms wildly in the air, his death-filming eyes darting hatred into the face of his conqueror. He then fell, in terrible spasms, to the earth; struggling, and clutching at the bushes, in his agony.

Stella stood, her hands clasped, and eyes raised heavenward, her lips moving in thankful prayer; as Carlos quickly glanced toward her, after having given the brave his death wound.

Hastily wiping his bowie-blade, and refraining, on account of the maiden's presence, from plunging it into the Indian's breast, he returned the weapon to its scabbard, springing to Stella's side, and clasping her in his arms, as he said in a low, but deep and impressive voice:

"Heaven bless you, my noble, brave Stella! This victory is yours. But for you, I believe that I would be lying there, in the place of that dying savage. I owe you my life!

"Your bravery, and thoughtfulness, in giving me my knife, was the salvation of us both!"

"What else could I do, Carlos?" returned the girl. "Do you suppose I would stand idly by, and be a witness to your murder—see you slain in an attempt to prevent my capture?"

"I saw, at once, that the hideous Indian had suddenly realized your helplessness, in regard to securing, or using your knife, and that you were at his mercy. Oh, it was terrible! It is fearful only to think of.

"Now, that the immediate danger is past I feel sick—deathly sick, and weak. It was a most fearful and awful moment, and it has been a great strain upon my nerves.

"Oh, Carlos! Let us fly. I cannot bear up under any more such awful sights and sounds. Let us fly, anywhere, from the vicinity of the merciless fiends, who seek us, thirsting for our blood!"

"Oh, that I should have had to witness such scenes—to endure such torture of mind!"

"You have done nobly, bravely! You are a heroine, Stella, in every sense of the word.

"I am thankful you have thus proved yourself a true Texan maiden. I am proud of you. I adore you! Here, surrounded by fearful dangers, with death in every step, I dare reveal my heart to you. I may be slain within the hour, but I shall die happier for having told you. Only say that you are not angry at my presumption, that you look upon me as a friend, and are glad that we have met. Say that much, and I ask no more, for that assurance will give me happiness, such as I have never dreamed was possible for me, or for any man to experience!"

"Carlos, whether you ask for more or not, you shall have more. You have saved me from death, and from worse than death, and it would be my duty to you to be not only your friend, but to love you with all my heart.

"But had you not risked life to save me, had we met under the most ordinary circumstances, I should, I know, have loved you.

"I do love you, Carlos. I am yours now and forever. Should we be killed, we will belong to each other still."

"Heaven bless you for those words, Stella. But we will not be slain. We will escape the red fiends. Your words nerve me to brave a thousand such."

He placed her in the saddle before him. "Negro will carry us safely through if we can only keep clear ground. You say that your father's ranch is due north from the falls. Is it possible to reach there without passing over

broken and rough ground, or through wooded tracts?"

"If we go between the two hills near the falls and north of them, and then swerve to the northwest, we can keep over clear ground. But, oh, Carlos! How I dread the attempt! I cannot help feeling that the night is full of horrors, and that we may not always escape as fortunately as we have been enabled thus far to do."

"But thank Heaven the moon shines, and that will guide us on our way. Hark! What is that? Carlos, they are coming! It is the war-party! We are lost!"

A hiss of warning came from the lips of the scout as he pressed Stella more fondly to his breast and jerked a revolver from his belt.

The loud rumble of many galloping hoofs sounded near at hand, and the next moment the Comanche war-party thundered past the covert of our friends, the warriors lashing their mustangs headlong in the direction of the falls of the Rio Blanco some two hundred yards north from the thicket in which were Carlos and Stella.

The latter trembled with terror as she clasped her arms around the young scout's neck, as if her all—her love and life—depended upon him.

And, in truth, it did.

CHAPTER V.

FIGHTING FEARFUL ODDS.

No human being could possibly have suffered more mental torture than did Carlos Cunningham, as, clasping Stella in his left arm, he sat his steed, and heard the approach of the horde of Comanches; the very silence of the mad mob proving, more than their previous yells on being baffled, that they were still bent upon the capture of himself and the maiden whom he had once rescued.

And little less anxiety and apprehension did the young scout feel when the Indians shot at terrific speed past his covert, without halting or inspecting the shades; for he felt positive they would not proceed beyond the falls, and that probably they would there seek for the corpses of the two red spies whom he had slain.

They would, without doubt, discover the drops of blood on the rocks, near the marks of the mustangs' hoofs; and would decide, from these evidences, that the braves were in the river, and would then search thoroughly for the bodies, to prevent their being scalped.

In this event, some of them would naturally follow the river down from the falls to where he was; reasoning that the bodies must have been carried down by the current, and perhaps lodged along shore, at some point on the rocks.

Carlos realized that he and Stella were in great danger; in fact, the night offered but little else. He was at a loss in what manner to proceed, for most certainly the poor girl had already been forced to undergo quite as much as she could well endure.

The young scout had no means of knowing or ascertaining the strength of the war-party.

It seemed reasonable to believe that a score, at least, had remained in the camp at Purgatory.

Besides, the Indians had dashed at such terrific speed, in an irregular mob, past the thicket and up the river, that he could not determine if all who had been in chase at the first alarm were present at the falls.

It was reasonable to suppose that spies were scattered beyond the first line of hills who might prove troublesome should he try to reach the Saunders ranch.

Wild yells of rage and fury now rung on the evening air, from the falls, proving that the Indians had discovered the plain "sign" on the rock shelf which told them that their two comrades had been shot on the very verge of the wall of the chasm and had fallen into the waters.

No time was to be lost, as soon the braves would be rushing down-stream, searching along the same for their slain.

"There is but one way open for us, Stella," said Carlos, in a low voice, but which betrayed his great anxiety; "we must return around the wood to the base of the second line of hills—the same route that I took when I escaped with you while you were unconscious."

"I was nearly 'corraled' at one time, and only the fleetness of Negro saved us. We must make a dash for liberty at once, for the red fiends are coming. Be brave! They shall not tear you from me as long as life and strength remain!"

"This is horrible!" exclaimed the young girl. "I prefer death to being in the power of those monsters. Oh, my poor papa and mamma!

They would be frantic did they know of the dangers that surround me."

"We will speak of them later on, I trust. Bear up now, and cling to me; for I shall ride at speed—ay, at terrific speed!"

"Our lives depend upon Negro. Should my stanch black steed fall, or fail us now, we are lost. Hark! That is the signal for a careful search of the waters."

"I know now, that they have left some of their number in the wood. Here we go!"

"Now you'll hear yells that will curdle your blood. You must guide Negro, if we come to close quarters. Take the bridle-reins, and trust to one who will save you, or die in the attempt!"

A prolonged and peculiar outcry, from a single Comanche followed the series of mad howls. This proved that the Indians had discovered the sign, and interpreted it.

This cry was the search signal from the chief.

Then, as Carlos spoke the last word to Stella, he gave a sharp whistle; and, out from the thicket, shot mustang, man, and maiden, into the open belt, swerving eastward.

The next moment, the air resounded with a simultaneous and terrible yell, followed by the thunderous and continuous clatter of many hoofs; and, down like an avalanche, dashed at headlong speed, nearly two-score of whooping Comanches, toward the fast-galloping, and doubly-laden steed.

Full five hundred yards intervened between the pursuers and the pursued, and the red braves at once realized that the noble black was too fleet for them to hope to overtake on clear ground. Then it was, that peculiar yells again burst from the throat of a single Indian of the pursuers, evidently the chief, and Carlos cried out:

"Hear that, Stella! I knew they had left searchers in the wood. That was a signal for them to intercept us. Show the same spirit now, that nerved you when you gave me my knife. Take the reins, and keep Negro within the open belt, near the verge of the wood."

"We must reach the second line of hills, and then dash westward. It would be madness, now, to gallop in the direction of your home."

Trembling and shuddering with fear and horror was the maiden, at the hellish sounds that had filled her ears, and the fearful sight that was presented to her view, as she gazed backward, over the shoulder of her protector; but, by a powerful effort of will, she controlled her emotions as much as was possible; saying, in a strange and unnatural voice, which betrayed the extreme strain her nerves sustained:

"In Heaven's name, why cannot we dash at once for my house? Oh, do, Carlos! Do, for mercy's sake, take me home!"

"And thus doom all who are there to a terrible death? No, no, Stella! We must do all in our power to lead the inhuman savages away from your home. If we do not, that home will be a smoldering ruin before another sun brightens the earth."

"I thought of this, in the thicket, when I told you we would speak of your home again, at the proper moment. You see, now, our position."

"Oh, yes! I had not thought of the sad consequences of leading those fiends toward my home and parents. May they have strength given them, to bear up under the fearful anxiety occasioned by my absence!"

"You know best what to do, Carlos! Oh, my brain will burst if such horrors long hover over us!"

"Did your father know, in what direction you rode from the ranch?" asked the young Texan, hurriedly.

"Oh, yes! He knew I was going to the falls."

"Then may Heaven help your father, Stella; for no mortal aid will save him!"

"What do you mean, Carlos? What mean you? For mercy's sake, explain!"

Thus cried the poor girl, clutching the arm of Carlos, and gazing into his face, in most torturing anxiety and apprehension.

She was pale as death, her hair was flying wildly over his shoulder; while, in her left hand, she held firmly by the bridle-reins—Negro galloping at full speed.

It was a most impressive sight! That beautiful girl, thus positioned, gazing into the face of the handsome scout—she in his embrace—and they upon the glossy black steed, flying over the ground like the wind; while, in the rear, dashed the mad mob of yelling, paint-daubed, feather-bedizened Comanches, in irregular array, lashing their half-wild mustangs mercilessly—the animals snorting with pain, and

plunging, with frantic bounds, on after the handsome pair!

For the moment, as Stella put the last question, all thoughts of the Indians, in connection with her own safety, were banished. Her whole mind was agonized by the words of the young scout in regard to the danger of her father, which she believed, but could not understand the nature and extent of.

"Why, my poor girl, he would, of course, start out at once to the falls, in search of you, after he had once become apprehensive."

"Perhaps, even now he is near at hand; and, if so, unless he is well mounted, and can join us, he is lost! It is probable, that your mother is alone at the ranch, if your father is in search of you. Are there any others there?"

"Oh yes!" she said, more hopefully; "there are three Mexican herders. But what can they do? Why, oh, why did I go to the falls?"

"Let us hope you were then directed by your guardian angel, and I by mine; that they watch over us, and guard us, and that happiness will yet come from the misery and anguish which we now suffer."

"What is to be, will be! It is our fate, and we must bow to the inevitable. But, look, Stella! Attend to the horse, or we are lost even now!"

As the scout thus yelled, he jerked one of his revolvers, and cocking the weapon, leveled it over Negro's head.

Gazing in their front, as Carlos called out, Stella, while exultant whoops rung afresh in their rear, beheld a mounted Indian, just lashing his mustang from the thickets to the west, directly to the middle of the clear belt to intercept them. The brave was in the act of fitting arrow to bow-string, as the revolver of the young Texan was leveled.

The warrior suddenly halted, and half-whirling his mustang, faced the scout; at the same time, bending his bow.

The silvery moon now illumined, and made more impressive the wild and savage scene.

This was a grand opportunity for that solitary brave to distinguish himself, and win renown and rank, by a brave deed, done within plain view of his chief and brother warriors; all of whom were now speeding toward the seemingly-doomed white man and maid, shooting out their exultant whoops at every bound of their mustangs.

Erect in his saddle sat the Comanche brave, a fine specimen of savage strength, beauty, menace, and hate; with proud triumph stamped upon his features, and manifested by his very position and bearing.

The tough bow, which a white man could not have bent two inches, was quickly bent to an arch, that brought the point near the hand of the stiff outstretched bow-arm; the feathered shaft kissing the painted cheek of its owner, whose muscles were strained to the utmost, as he aimed directly between the ears of his horse at the fast on-coming scout. But ere the bronze fingers could permit the fatal string to loosen and twang, a spurt of fire issued from the deadly tube of Carlos Cunningham; and, with a horrible death-yell, the single brave, who barred the way of our friend, threw his arms in air, his bow falling even as the string was loosened, the feathered shaft flying wild, with but half its common force; while the affrighted mustang reared wildly with a snort of terror, throwing its rider, a lifeless corpse, to the earth!

Then the horse bounded at terrific speed into the dense thickets to the west.

The mad yells and howls that rung from the war-party in the rear, as the brave fell to the earth, the mustang fled, and the skillful scout with his fair charge sped on the sable steed, making a flying leap over the corpse, which a moment previous, was full of life, hate, revenge, and daring—this series of sounds was simply infernal.

But these were soon transformed to whoops of joyous exultation and yells of cheer; for three more warriors dashed from the dark shades, barring the way of Carlos who was now almost despairing!

"Father in Heaven protect us!" exclaimed Stella in an agony of terror and despair.

"We are lost, Carlos—lost! lost!"

"Bear up, darling, and attend to Negro. While there is life there is hope."

"My arm is braced with the strength of a half-dozen men, and my nerves are as firm as steel; for life, your life depends upon me and my noble horse!"

"At them, Negro! We'll win the game, or spread death on our trail broadcast!"

Thus yelled Carlos Cunningham.

Then he gave a shrill whistle, and again elevated his deadly "colt."

Negro laid his ears back closely upon his neck, his muzzle pointed straight ahead—neck in a line with his backbone, and forehead nearly the same. Thus he shot forward with increased speed toward the trio of bronzed braves, while the air rung with unearthly whoops.

CHAPTER VI.

NOT SINGLY, BUT IN BATTALIONS.

NOTWITHSTANDING the rapidly shouted words of Carlos, which were more hopeful and confident than otherwise, Stella thrust her right arm about the scout, and clung tremblingly to him; although she still maintained her hold upon the bridle reins, which, however, seemed almost needless, as Negro kept directly onward in the middle of the open belt, toward the three belligerent braves.

These were evidently confident of securing both the scout and the maiden as captives; and, doubtless, intended to take both of them alive, for neither had recourse to his bow.

One bold, couched, his long steel-pointed lance, while each of the other two quickly coiled a lasso, and adjusted the noose of the same; the brave with the lance stationing himself directly in the path of the young Texan, and the lassoists on either side, ready for the cast.

A loud and taunting yell came from the lips of the scout. This greatly dumfounded the braves ahead, who could not understand why the white man, who to them seemed doomed, without the possibility of escape, should manifest such contempt for them, and evince such a degree of daring in the very face of death.

Had these three warriors witnessed the snapshot of the scout, which had deprived their comrade of life—the distance which had intervened between the scout and the Indian who had been slain, as well as the motion of the horse, being taken into consideration—they would not have been as confident of success; and, without doubt, they would have been more prudent, taking measures to slay the young white brave, in place of capturing him with their lassoes.

The yell of taunt and derision, given by Carlos, seemed, not only to the Indians but to poor Stella, a defiance of death; for, to neither did there appear the slightest possibility of the scout's escaping. And the main war-party, who dashed like an avalanche in the rear, thrust their arrows back to the quivers; so confident were they that the mad pursuit was at an end, and they would have matters all their own way.

A vocal pandemonium of joyous outcries, exultant and vengeful whoops, and yells of cheer to the three braves, sounded from the savage horde.

But, firm as a rock sat Carlos, the scout, erect in his saddle; his left arm clasping the form of the appalled maiden, whose face was ghastly as death, and drawn with the intensity of terror.

With suppressed breath, the horrified maiden gazed with a fixed stare; her eyes starting at the terrible trio, as they positioned themselves in the manner that has been described.

Carlos dared not look into the face of Stella. All his attention he now concentrated upon that horrible three in his front.

He knew that the middle brave, with the lance, intended to pierce the head of Negro with his weapon; therefore the scout selected that warrior as his first victim. But, as the revolver was leveled, this Comanche threw himself flat upon his horse, his head shielded by the neck of his mustang. Still, however, he poised his lance far in front of the muzzle of the horse; the moon's rays glinting upon the long steel point.

Baffled was Carlos for the moment, but instantly he changed his aim and pulled trigger. A flash, a sharp report, and a blood-curdling death-yell followed.

One of the lassoists lay quivering in death-spasms upon the sward; and the next instant the sounds mentioned were repeated as echoes to the first, the young scout having made two snap shots without seeming to have even taken aim.

Two mustangs galloped wildly, and with snorts of terror, past Negro, to join the war-party, riderless; while the pair of lassoists lay, gasping out their last breath.

At once the young man thrust his revolver into his belt, and grasping the bridle-rein, swerved Negro slightly to one side; the brave with the lance being momentarily dumfounded

at the totally unexpected death of his two comrades.

Only this instantaneous grasp of the bridles by Carlos saved the gallant steed of the latter; who, the very instant that he turned his horse aside, yelled, as he made a clutch at the lance:

"Pull up, Stella! Pull the reins, for life depends upon it!"

The miraculous success of her brave and skillful defender had relieved the maiden, to some extent, from the all-absorbing terror that had ruled her, enabling her, by a herculean effort of will and muscle, to check for a moment the headlong speed of Negro.

This, however, would most probably have been impossible had not Carlos given a peculiar outcry, which his intelligent steed understood.

With lightning-like movements and a strength born of the emergency of the moment—one that was more than life to the maiden, and certain death to himself depended upon it—the young scout wrenched the lance from the clutch of the Comanche, reversed the weapon in an instant and plunged the same entirely through the brave's body!

Then again the shrill whistle of Carlos sounded, and on darted the noble Negro, while the air was rent with demoniac yells, most terrible to hear, and which had been for a moment withheld by the pursuing war-party, on account of their intense amazement at the bewildering events which were thus enacted before their eyes.

Miraculous, indeed, had been the skill and success of the daring scout; who might well be judged by his pursuers as "Big Medicine."

Circling his sombrero over his head, with a yell of triumph and taunt, on dashed the young Texan, to the fury, the insane, and frantic fury of the Comanche horde.

Six braves, as they knew, had been slain by this one daring, most skillful, and detested Texan, and their amazement and madness would have been no less had they known that another of their comrades lay in the thicket, by the Blanco, his life-blood having been let out by the knife of the scout.

Most mysterious to the Comanches was the presence of the maiden; also, the fact that she had no horse. Besides this, the shooting of the two spies at the falls had puzzled all.

They could not understand why the white squaw was thus situated, or the circumstances that had commenced such a series of most tragic events.

Had they but discovered the dead horse of the maiden all would have been plain.

There was not, to their knowledge, any ranch in the immediate vicinity, and no trail of any wagon-train had been discovered by them; hence, it had been one of the greatest of mysteries to all to see the maiden carried thus by the young white brave.

But the miraculous skill of the latter had really and completely dumfounded them.

Not the slightest doubt had been entertained by any among the Comanche war-party in regard to the capture of the Texan and maiden.

It had been a foregone conclusion with them.

They had already anticipated the pleasure that would be theirs before another sun should have arisen in torturing the slayer of their two comrades at the falls of the Rio Blanco, but, lo and behold! the detested Texan had slain four more braves within the view of all!

Such was the amazement of the mass of the war-party that they jerked jaw-straps upon reaching the spot where lay the three corpses of the warriors, who, they had felt no doubt, would have captured the whites instead of being slain—thus the savage horde halted, as if they could hardly believe their senses, as if they looked for the dead to bound to their feet and hasten in chase of the scout.

Even the chief drew jaw-strap and gazed down at the still and silent dead, all noting that the two lassoists had been shot in the center of their foreheads, and observing that the lance was driven directly through the breast of the third brave, the point projecting from the back. These were startling proofs of the skill, strength and dexterity of the young Texan.

Amazement, however, gave way to insane fury and a thrice intensified longing for revenge. Then from the chief rung a terrific whoop, as he circled his quirt hissing through the air and about the hams of his mustang.

The animal, with a snort of pain and fright, sprung upward and then shot forward on the trail, while the whoops of the entire horde rung clear and distinct through the night air as all thundered on in mad pursuit.

But Carlos and his precious charge had dis-

appeared around the curve in the wood, between the same and the second line of hills from the river.

That series of vengeful outcries told the scout plainly that his red foes were so furious for revenge that there was now no hope that the terrible race for life would end for some time to come, and he urged his noble horse onward, while Stella lay passive in his arms.

But the young man had no time to note the condition of the maiden, or even to speak a word, for he expected each instant that others of the Comanche war-party would appear in his front.

In deep sounding and heartfelt tones he had, as Negro shot away from the last of his victims, cried out in his relief and gratitude:

"Thank Heaven! Safe we are again for a time, my darling! On, Negro, my noble steed; on to freedom!"

And on the magnificent black animal bounded, seeming proud of his burdens and his speed. On he went, clattering over the shale between the base of the hills and the thick, dark wood in a westward course. Carlos shot a glance behind him.

Not an Indian was within view.

Stranger still, the vengeful whoops had ceased.

All had become as still as death.

Even the roar of the distant falls was drowned by the sounds of the horse's hoofs.

Stella Saunders roused herself and said in soft and tender tones as she looked into the face of her preserver:

"Again you have saved me from those dreadful savages; and that, when I saw not the very slightest room for hope. How brave and daring you are! I can hardly believe my senses—gazing over the back trail—"for not one of the horrible horde is in view."

"I am certainly most thankful, Stella, that my arm has been nerved, and my strength sustained, during the fearful ordeal."

"I did not dare look in your face, lest my emotions would jeopardize our lives. Do not, however, base any hope on the silence and disappearance of our enemies. They are merciless."

"They have now some devilish scheme in their minds, by which to effect our capture. They know the lay of the land about here much better than I do; for I have only passed up and down the river near to the bank!"

"If I mistake not they have dashed to the opposite side of the line of hills, thinking that I will slacken speed, and they can then intercept us. If we can only reach the Devil's Backbone, we may be able to find a cavity in the rock—a natural fort—in which we could, for a time be safe."

"I trust we may be able to do so, Stella darling, for this constant strain upon your mind is terrible for you to bear!"

"Oh, Carlos! If we could only gallop to the ranch. I want so much, to go home to my father and mother. Since those dread whoops no longer sound, and the danger seems past, I am weak and faint!"

"I dare not turn northward, Stella, for the war-party are sure to follow us. Even now, savage eyes, I doubt not, are watching us from some elevation not far distant."

"To go to your home, would doom your parents to death, and the ranch to the flames; and it would cause us, and all at the ranch, to lose our lives; for we would be forced to take refuge in the dwelling, and it would be surrounded, and burned over our heads."

"May God direct you, Carlos, as He has thus far! I will say no more. You know what is best. But I thought we had seen the last of those red fiends."

"This is terrible, most terrible; and I pray I may be spared from such sights and sounds as I have beard and seen, since I sat gazing at that brilliant sunset from the Blanco Falls!"

"You cannot conceive how my heart and brain are tortured, my poor girl, at being a witness to your anguish and terror, and at knowing your danger. But this cannot be remedied, or it should be. We ought to be thankful that we have, thus far, escaped—"

Carlos was here interrupted by the sharp crack of a rifle, the bullet from which whistled past the head of his horse, and only a few inches from the same, as he readily determined by the sound. This was inexplicable.

Negro was still galloping at full speed; the hills to the right, from whence the rifle had been fired, being more broken and rough, and here and there dotted with small clumps of dwarf trees.

Instantly the young scout shot a glance along the near hillside, and perceived a small puff of

smoke, rising from the shaded side of a clump of trees.

"Oh, Carlos! What does that shot mean? What new danger is this?"

"I will tell you what I think, Stella. I believe it was your father who fired at us. It was a white man, I am sure, for there was not a gun, as far as I saw, among the Comanches."

"My father? Oh, no; that cannot be! Why should he shoot at us?"

The scout slackened the speed of his horse, as he answered quickly, and with much anxiety:

"Because he had just seen and recognized you. He knows nothing of the Indians being in the vicinity, and he believes me to be an outlaw who is carrying you away."

"There—look! I was right; it is a white man. Whether it is your father or not, that you can soon determine."

"By Heaven! he will be slain if he does not join us. See, Stella! There are the painted demons dashing between the hills. They have urged their horses at terrific speed, but thank goodness, they have not got ahead of us!"

"But the white man—what do you mean?"

Stella had sprung upward, her hands upon the shoulder of Carlos, in the most intense excitement and anxiety, all her terror and dread returning at the sight of the Comanches dashing from between two of the elevations but a short distance in their rear.

At sight of their white foes, the savages again uttered terrific whoops.

"Look!" directed Carlos Cunningham, pointing up the hillside. "There is the man who fired at us, and he would again have pulled trigger had not the Comanches yelled. Thank Heaven! he partly understands the situation now."

Swinging his sombrero in the air, the young man uttered a ringing shout.

At the same instant, out from the shade of the clump of trees darted a horseman, also swinging his hat and giving out frantic yells.

"Carlos—Carlos! it is he—my poor father! The red fiends will kill him!"

And with a piercing shriek, poor Stella sunk senseless and ghastly as a corpse back into the arms of the young scout, who uttered a groan of deep anguish.

Then he shot out his signal whistle, which caused Negro to dart forward at increased speed.

CHAPTER VII.

GAINING BREATHING SPACE.

Few men were ever placed in a more agonizing position than was Carlos Cunningham when Stella Saunders, with a shriek of anguish, sunk back senseless into the embrace of his left arm; and Negro darted westward, at increased speed, when the young Texan gave his signal-whistle.

To his right, down the hillside, dashed the father of the maiden whom he had rescued from a chain of dangers—a man who was, beyond doubt, almost insane with anxiety and horror at beholding his daughter in the arms of a stranger; while a horde of whooping savages plunged in mad pursuit along the base of the hills, down one of which the old ranchero was galloping at a speed that was dangerous to himself and his horse.

There was but one course for Carlos to pursue that promised the slightest chance for escape from the Comanches, that being toward the Devil's Backbone, or the broken, irregular ground before that was reached.

Mr. Saunders, the father of Stella, it was easy for Carlos to see, was in most deadly danger; for he was some distance up from the clear belt, along which he and the Indians were speeding, and before reaching the same he would be much nearer the red foe than Carlos and Stella were.

The scout, for all this, dared not lessen his speed, and thus lose that much of his prospect of escaping with Stella. The only hope for the old ranchero was in the speed of his horse.

Were the animal to fall in that dangerous course down the hillside, its rider was doomed beyond a doubt, for there were no hiding-places of sufficient extent, to be secure from the search of the savages. It was, certainly, a critical moment for the agonized father; who, in addition to his knowing and realizing the danger that threatened his darling, must also know that his home and wife were in peril, and his own life as well.

Carlos, although going at headlong speed,

guided his noble steed, at the same time gazing over his shoulder and yelling at the top of his voice; knowing that the ranchero would thus understand his only chance to be in hastening and joining him—thus assisting in defending his child from the Comanches.

That the old gentleman had this end in view was evident to the scout, however, previous to the yells of the latter; for he galloped in a quartering course, down the hillside, south-westerly, and directly toward Carlos.

Upon discovering the ranchero, exultant yells of the savages were redoubled, and they lashed their horses unmercifully.

It required but a few fitting glances, for the young man to determine that Stella's father was remarkably well-mounted. This relieved him greatly.

That the young girl was now unconscious, was a fact far from being deplorable; as, for the time being, the awful strain upon her mind was thus at an end.

Greatly to the relief of Carlos, he discovered that, but half a mile ahead, there was a dense wood—the northern outskirts of Purgatory—beyond which, the country, as he knew, was much broken; there being deep gullies, huge boulders and clefts, with seams and gorges in the sides of the more rocky elevations.

Could he and Mr. Saunders reach that point without accident, there was some hope of their being able to find a place of hiding, and one easy of defense, which would promise at least temporary security.

There was little hope, however, of their holding out any great length of time against such odds; and far less hope of any force of whites, who could cope with the Comanches, being in the vicinity.

Altogether the outlook was far from flattering.

The Indians were furious for revenge; madly eager for scalps, and victims for the torture-stake.

Confident in being able to evade the savages, did no accident happen to Negro, Carlos, at length, unable to bear the concern and deep suspense caused by the danger that threatened the father of Stella, slackened the speed of his horse, and half-turning in his saddle gazed behind him.

On, thundering toward him, upon a fleet horse, the young scout beheld to his relief and joy, the ranchero; while the foremost of the Indians were, at the least, two hundred yards in his rear.

He now jerked Negro to a halt, and, in a moment after, the father of the maiden who had become so dear to him on this eventful evening, was sufficiently near for Carlos to read his features. The old man's face was pale, and expressed the utmost anxiety and apprehension.

He was of commanding mien, handsome and well formed, muscular and evidently fearless and brave; for he cast glances behind him, and several times half-leveled his rifle to fire at his old pursuers. But, as often did he lower the weapon; for the distance was too great to risk a shot.

Attired as a ranchero, in homespun of grayish cloth, well armed and well mounted was Mr. Saunders—facts that gave the scout hope; as did also the keen black eyes, which shot piercing glances at Carlos as he came nearer. He had long flowing gray hair and beard, but appeared to be hale, hearty, and strong.

"In Heaven's name, stranger, spur on!"

Thus yelled the ranchero, as he reached a point near Carlos; who again gave his piercing whistle, and Negro bounded on in the direction of Purgatory.

The next moment, the two horses were galloping neck and neck; the old man gazing at his senseless daughter, with an agony so intense that he remained speechless.

"Thank Heaven! You have escaped the red devils!" yelled Carlos; "I feared they would cut you off. Your daughter fainted at sight of your peril, but she is uninjured."

"My name is Carlos Cunningham, and I arrived at Blanco Falls just in time to save Miss Saunders from death."

"She was at the falls, and the Indians charged upon her; but her horse sprung over into the chasm with her. Fortunately, I reached the spot in time to rescue her from drowning; and I shot the two savages who first discovered her."

"The Comanches have run me a long distance, and I have slain seven braves in all; thus causing them to be mad for revenge. I should have headed for your ranch, but I dared not do so; knowing that the red demons would fol-

low, massacre all, and burn your home. Hence the course I have taken."

"Our only hope is, to reach Devil's Backbone, and seek a hiding-place easy of defense."

"Have no concern in regard to the unconsciousness of your daughter; for it is much better that she be in such a state, than to suffer the horror and terror, which it has been her lot to endure, since her arrival at sunset, at Blanco Falls."

Leaning toward Mr. Saunders, Carlos shouted these explanations, necessary to the occasion; while the old ranchero stared at him, in mingled wonder and gratitude, and at times glancing into the death like face of Stella. He appeared to be totally unconscious of the wildly pursuing Comanches, so close in their rear.

Impulsively he put out his hand to the young scout, as the latter finished his explanations; and cried out, in a voice that was broken by his strong emotions:

"May God bless you, for your brave and noble acts, in saving and protecting my child! But, what shall we, what can we do, to escape the infernal savages?"

"Providence certainly led you to the falls. I am a stranger to border life, never having seen hostile Indians until to-night. Consequently our lives depend upon you, for I judge you are a scout, and well used to the ways of the merciless red-men."

"This is terrible torture, to see my darling child thus, and know what will follow, should she be captured!"

"Spur on, sir! And watch well the Indians. Follow me, and put in a shot when you can! This is no time for words. We must act."

"On, Negro, on! The red fiends have gained since we have conversed, and paid less attention to them. Give them a shot, sir! I am incumbered by Miss Stella, and cannot."

"All right!" returned the old man, giving as he spoke a tender look into the pale face of his darling, and half-turning in his saddle. "We'll fight the painted devils to the last. They shall not have my child!"

A moment after, Carlos heard the sharp crack of the ranchero's rifle, and cast a glance back, in time to see one of the leading Comanches throw his arms wildly in the air, as furious yells burst from his comrade braves, and fall beneath the fast-flying hoofs.

Without halting, however, on dashed the fiendish horde, with blood-chilling whoops of war and vengeance.

The next instant, Carlos dashed into the dense shades of Purgatory, yelling:

"Follow me, Saunders, or all is lost!"

But the words were needless, for the old ranchero shot into the wood, at the heels of Negro, the young scout having, luckily, struck a path, along which he could maintain the same speed as in the open, by bending slightly in his saddle.

Suddenly, as on a previous occasion, all sounds of pursuit ceased, as far as whoops and yells were concerned, but, owing to the noise made by the movement of the bushes, as the whites dashed along the path, they could not distinguish that made by hoofs upon the sward.

Thus on, for quite a distance, sped Carlos and the old ranchero, neither speaking a word; but both filled with intense anxiety and apprehension, knowing not at what moment they might strike a point, that would render further flight on horseback impossible.

Greatly to the relief and joy of the young Texan, however, he had galloped but a few hundred yards, when out sprung Negro from the wood into the bright moonlight; and, not half a mile ahead, Carlos discovered the rough, boulder-strewn approach to Devil's Backbone.

This was a gradual incline, seamed by dark wash-outs, chasms, fissures, and gorges; dense clumps of dwarf-trees and shrubs being scattered here and there.

Between the wood, and these promising places of retreat and defense, were many *mottes*; within which might, as Carlos reasoned, be lurking some of the Indians of the war-party, who had, without doubt, remained in their camp, at the time of the alarm at the falls, and been warned by the yells of those in the chase, of the direction taken by them. Nothing was more likely than this.

The scout, therefore, resolved to give every *motte* a wide berth; and, directing Mr. Saunders to keep close by him, they both, without a word of further talk, dashed toward their seeming ark of safety, Devil's Backbone—the intervening space being clear of any elevation of importance.

The young scout did not believe that the Indians had given up the chase; indeed he had

no doubt that the pursuers had ceased their yelling and whooping, for a purpose.

Instantly it flashed upon the mind of Carlos, that the red foe, after witnessing his skill, had decided that he and the ranchero had darted into the wood, for the purpose of making a stand; and that they had sprung from their horses, and were ready, on the border of the timber, to shoot the foremost of their pursuers.

This, the young man concluded must be the cause of the cessation of the whoops and yells.

If such was indeed the case, they were fortunate; for they would be able to gain quite a distance, before the Comanches could find out their mistake.

It was probable that a halt had been made beyond the range of rifles, and braves had been dispatched, in a circling course, to the right and left of the point at which he and the old man had entered the wood. These were to dismount and steal upon them through the undergrowth in their rear.

This was the only reasonable manner of accounting for the sudden and continued silence; and, as Carlos and Mr. Saunders dashed on, the former explained this to the ranchero; their glances in the rear convincing them that this must be the true state of affairs; as the Indians did not break from the shades, at the time they should have appeared had they continued on at the speed maintained by them in the open belt.

"Thank God, we are in comparative safety at last!"

This was the exclamation of Carlos Cunningham, as he urged his horse into a wash-out, which, a short distance ahead, showed considerable depth, and led toward the rough range.

Along the bed of this gully, which deepened at every bound, both the now greatly relieved men galloped, until they reached a point, where only their heads projected above the hard-clay walls. Then they drew rein, and gazed toward the dark wood, which had but recently sheltered them, and had, beyond a doubt, proved to be their salvation, from the fact that it had occasioned a halt of their red pursuers, thus enabling them to gain a place that was secure from view, before the Comanches broke forth from the dense shades.

"Heaven be praised!" cried the old ranchero; "we have reached a point where we can, without doubt, find a place easy to defend. Let us go on, however, my friend, for delay is dangerous in the extreme."

"You are right, Mr. Saunders! We have no time to lose; for there the red fiends are, and as I live they cannot comprehend our manner of avoiding them. They can detect no trail in the wood, as it is dark, and the dry, scorched, and matted grass, over which we have ridden, leaves no 'sign.'"

"They will, however, soon inspect the various approaches to the range, and thus discover our trail in the clay. On, Negro, on! Time is more precious to us than gold."

And on, up the bed of the wash-out, dashed our friends; while the Comanche horde lashed their mustangs hither and thither along the border of the wood, vainly striving to discover the trail.

At times, they plunged their horses from the timber, at different points; proving that the shades had been most systematically searched.

Yells of baffled rage rung shrill on the night air. These sounds, too, soon drew nearer and nearer the range, proving to the fugitives, that their foes were coming, like the wind, toward Devil's Backbone!

CHAPTER VIII.

HOLDING THE FORT.

Up the bed of the dark wash out galloped Carlos, still carrying the fair Stella, and the agonized father of the senseless maiden speeding in the rear, his rifle cocked, and he keeping an anxious watch behind them.

But soon the walls of the huge chasm towered far above, and our friends were in Egyptian-like darkness, except at favorable points where branching gullies allowed the moon's rays to penetrate, or the windings of the huge channel, formed by the waters rushing down the range during heavy rains, ran directly east from west.

Up one of the smaller gullies Carlos now guided Negro, and soon emerged from the same directly on the shady side of a dense *motte*, at the very base of the range.

"Dismount quickly!" called out the young scout. "We have no time to lose. We must leave our horses in this *motte*. If I were alone I would risk a dash through the red devils, rather than abandon Negro; but Miss Stella's

presence forces us to take to the rocks, where a horse cannot go.

"I most sincerely hope the Indians will not discover our animals; but if they do, and we prevent the fiends from further outrages, I'll follow their trail, and risk my life to regain Negro."

"Here, take this poor girl, Mr. Saunders! I see she is reviving, to again go through more than tongue can describe. Most certainly she will never, if spared, forget this night's experience."

The old ranchero had sprung to the earth, as Carlos first spoke, and with a tenderness that was most touching, clasped his daughter in his arms, as the scout lowered her from his saddle.

The manifestations of affection made by the agonized father, caused the maiden, whose consciousness had been slowly returning, as the young Texan had asserted, to open her eyes.

At first she was dazed and bewildered, and not able to realize the near past, or to understand her position and surroundings; but the low, tender, and most affectionate words of her fond father served to recall her partly to herself. Then all became suddenly plain to her, by the fierce whoops of triumph that now rung from the mouth of the wash-out, as the Indians discovered the trail of their hated foes.

Clasping her arms about her father's neck, poor Stella mingled her tears with his, greatly to the relief of his overtaxed brain.

Meanwhile the young scout led both horses into the *motte*, slipped the bridles, and secured the neck-ropes to limbs of the trees. Then, taking his carbine, and replenishing his ammunition-pouch from his saddle-bags, he strode from the shades to the side of the reunited parent and child.

Instantly upon the appearance of the young man, Stella broke from the clasp of her father, and sprung into his arms, crying out, excitedly: "Heaven bless you, Carlos!"

Then, turning to the old ranchero, who gazed in amazement at the extravagant actions of his daughter, she said:

"Father, this brave and daring scout has saved my life at the risk of his own, many times this terrible night. We owe him more than I can say. He has been my earthly savior, papa!"

"And," returned Carlos quickly, with much of anxiety in his tone and manner, "I fear you will never live to pay me, or I to receive more of your uncalled-for thanks for doing what was no more than my duty, unless we hurry up the range."

"Here, Mr. Saunders, please carry my carbine. I am younger than you, and will bear your daughter over the rougher places."

"Come, hasten! The merciless red avengers are, many of them, already speeding up the wash-out."

And without waiting for further words, the scout grasped the maiden in his strong arms and strode up the rough side of Devil's Backbone; the *motte* screening them from the view of the Indians in the clear space between wood and gully.

Somewhat bewildered and most terribly anxious, the old ranchero rushed on in the rear, casting back glances and keeping his carbine, as well as the weapon of Carlos, ready for service.

The course up the side of the range was most difficult, especially as the scout chose the roughest way, where boulders and fissures afforded shelter from the view of the Indians; and our friends at length reached a point above the top of the *motte*, which had at first prevented them from being observed by those of the Comanches who had not as yet reached and entered the wash-out.

Where it was possible Stella insisted upon Carlos allowing her to walk; still, however, clinging to his hand and arm. Her hat had been lost in the chase, and her long tresses hung free; her face having regained some of its banished color, from feeling more safe, now they appeared to be in a fair way to evade capture.

Besides this, there was the presence of her father; and she had the utmost confidence in Carlos, notwithstanding he appeared to be fully as anxious as when the foe had been in immediate pursuit.

So difficult was the ascent that there was no opportunity for conversation, and, in fact, they were all in such a perilous position that neither of them seemed inclined for words. The senses of the old man and Carlos were strained, not only to detect any favorable point of refuge, but to interpret each and every sound that met their ears.

They soon reached and passed along a rough

and narrow shelf, the outer side being a sheer rock wall, and the inner as steep and impossible to surmount. Here the young scout suddenly halted, exclaiming:

"Here we are, Mr. Saunders! Providentially we have wandered directly, I do believe, to the only, or at least the most favorable position of defense against numbers that there is on the range. Come in at once, before the red demons reach the upper side of the wash-out."

As he spoke the young man strode into a cave-like opening in the rock wall, being forced to stoop somewhat, and leading Stella after him.

The old ranchero followed.

"Please remain at the entrance, secure from view, Mr. Saunders, until I explore this cave. I have a flint and steel. Stella, stand perfectly still."

"I will procure a pine branch from the shelf—I saw one just before I entered. How fortunate it is that we discovered this easily defended retreat!"

"Do not leave me in this dark place!" implored the young girl.

"Fear nothing! I will be with you in a moment," returned Carlos.

The scout then sprung to the entrance, and addressed the old ranchero:

"Have the Indians made their appearance?"

"Not yet. But there are quite a number coming toward the range without having entered the wash-out. They cannot detect our presence, however, as this point is in shade. A light inside might betray us to them."

"I shall guard against that by holding my sombrero between the torch and the entrance. Ah! There is the broken branch. It is just the thing for a torch."

"Keep cool and collected, Mr. Saunders! I begin to feel more hopeful now."

"Heaven grant we may succeed in evading the whooping demons, Mr. Cunningham! Oh, my poor child! That she should thus suffer is terrible. But I ought not to complain."

"She might now, but for you, have been a captive in the hands of those painted savages!"

Carlos, eager in his object, and anxious to relieve the mind of Stella, darted into the dark cave; and, speaking a word of cheer, groped his way, by feeling, until he reached what he deemed a prudent distance at which to strike a light.

Soon he had the torch ablaze, and shading it with his sombrero, gazed around, discovering a branch passage to his left, into which he sprung. He soon returned to the entrance, and said hastily, but with much satisfaction and relief:

"Come, Stella! I have found a cozy place for you, and one at which there is no danger of the light from the torch being seen."

The maiden quickly advanced, and soon both stood in a small, natural cave-chamber.

Carlos thrust the torch into a crack in the rock wall. He then spread out his arms and clasped Stella to his breast, saying:

"Be of good cheer, my darling! Here you are, thank Heaven, safe! And your father and myself will defend you to the death. The red marauders shall enter here only over my corpse!"

"Oh, Carlos! I will pray God to help you; and to deliver us from all these dangers!"

"And I trust and believe your prayers will be answered," was the reply. "We will hope for the best. Do not get excited more than you can help."

"I will inform you of all that occurs. Good-bye for a short time!"

The poor girl seemed reluctant to allow one who had proved himself so loyal and self-sacrificing to leave her for a moment; but Carlos gently tore himself free from her grasp and rushed to the entrance of the cavern.

At the first sound of the scout's footsteps Mr. Saunders cried out, in great excitement and apprehension:

"Mr. Cunningham, I am almost frantic! I shall go insane with this night's horrors."

"Look yonder, to the northeast! There is my ranch, in plain view; and, if the Indians advance up the range, even half-way to this point, they will discover my home!"

"I am a recent settler, and have no near neighbors—none nearer than five miles. By Heavens, sir! If the Comanches come up the range and discover my ranch, they will gallop there at once and burn me out. My wife, too will be murdered!"

"Merciful Father! What a night of horror! In the name of pity, what shall I do?"

"You can do nothing, my friend, except to remain here and protect your daughter. There is no escape down the side of the range."

"It would be certain death—death by the most terrible torture—and would avail nothing. It is as you say.

"Your ranch is in view. It is strange we did not think of that; but, even had we done so, it would have been impossible for us to have reached your home, and could we have done so, we should all have been butchered.

"We are very lucky as it is and you should be thankful that you escaped with your life, and that your daughter is safe. We have all been very near to death—Stella and myself—much nearer than you can possibly imagine.

"Could I but steal down to my horse I would make an effort to reach your ranch, and convey your wife to a place of hiding, in anticipation of a visit by the Indians to your home. But that is now impossible.

"However, if there is a possibility of the red fiends hastening in that direction I will see what I can do to save Mrs. Saunders, although it would be tempting fate to try and run such a gantlet, and also to leave you here to defend your daughter alone.

"If any one of your herders was within hearing of the Comanches I should suppose he would at once gallop for assistance."

"I ordered two of them out to assist me in my search for Stella at the same time that I left the ranch. They must have started soon after I did."

"Yes," put in Carlos, "and I see them both.

"Look there! They ride but half a mile north of the point at which we dashed from the wood. They did not hear the whoops or they would not be riding thus leisurely.

"By Heavens! They will both be captured if they keep on, and we are powerless to warn them."

At this moment a series of exultant whoops rung up the range, and Carlos cried out:

"The red trailers have reached the *motte* and discovered our 'sign.' Look! They are on foot.

"They have left their mustangs in the wash-out, which proves that they are confident we have climbed the range. They cannot, however, trace us over the rocks, and we hold the lives of many of them at our command.

"Good! The whoops have been heard by your herders. They have jerked their horses to a halt.

"If the Indians discover them, a score of them will go in pursuit. Oh, if they only knew enough to ride off for help! But you cannot expect much from those ignorant Greasers!"

"You are right, my friend!" said the old ranchero; "but they know enough to take care of themselves. See! They turn and fly, like the wind, back to the ranch."

"Yes, and they would gallop just as fast away from your home, did they see the Indians advancing toward it, and leave your property and wife unprotected."

"I believe you, Mr. Cunningham! May Heaven give me strength to bear all this! I feel as though my brain would burst. Look! The red demons come!"

As he spoke, the old man pointed downward. Flitting from point to point, in a long and scattered line, with weapons in hand, up the side of the range sprang the hideous painted horde of Comanches; all shooting glances here and there, and allowing no covert, however small, to escape their notice.

"Keep cool," again enjoined the young scout calmly. "We hold the advantage, and they will have to fight long and hard to get the best of us. When I am dead, then they may have a chance to capture Stella Saunders—not before!"

CHAPTER IX.

RECONNOITERING THE FOE.

THE scene that was presented to the view of the young scout and the old ranchero was such as to appall the stoutest heart. Full a score of hideous war-painted Comanches were flitting, fiend-like, up the side of the rocky range, directly toward them.

All whoops and yells had ceased from the time that the Indians had sprung upward in their search; so eager were they, and so confident that their intended victims were but a short distance up the range, that they made no delay, even to search for the horses of the fugitives.

More fiendish and frightful the long line of warriors appeared, in their eager and silent search, than when filling the air with their hellish outcries; their quick movements in darting from boulder to boulder, proving the intensity of their vengeful hate, and their determination to secure the whites.

Fully half-way from the base of the range and the cavern, had the red braves climbed, yet no indications had they discovered that the refugees were in the immediate vicinity.

This seemed to astonish them, and they halted to rest from their exertions, and gazed around them, yet uttering no sound.

Both Carlos and Mr. Saunders lay crouched, their carbines in hand, and ready at any moment to send their bullets into those braves who might mount upon the shelf and dash toward the cavern.

Carlos had impressed upon the old man's mind that they ought to wait until discovery was inevitable, and there was no possibility of wasting their ammunition. A half-dozen well-directed bullets at the last moment, tumbling as many braves from the ledge, would serve to stop the advance of the foe, forcing them to seek cover, and giving them fair warning as to what they might expect.

Should they succeed in accomplishing this, the Indians would, without doubt, be more prudent, and would perhaps be prevented from charging up to the cavern in a body, the only manner of attack of which the young scout was in the least afraid.

No sooner, however, did Carlos observe that the warriors, by their rapid movements and over-exertion in climbing the steep range had become fatigued and somewhat discouraged—most of their number standing erect and silent, as they shot glances in all directions—than he saw at once that a change in the programme was liable to occur at once. Nor was he far wrong in his conjecture.

The two Mexican herders were now in plain view, galloping toward the Saunders Ranch, which was plainly revealed by the bright moonlight.

At the very moment the Comanches halted to rest from their fatigue, the scout knew that the keen-eyed braves would discover the herders and the ranch as well.

Carlos was instantly oppressed by the most agonizing concern. He realized that the whole course of events must quickly change, thus forcing him to leave Stella in the care of her father, and hasten, as he had promised, to attempt to save the mother from the ruthless savages.

For all that, the young Texan was not prepared for what was to come.

The change of operations by the Indians was to be more complete and surprising than he had supposed, or even believed possible.

So positive was Carlos that the savages would discover the ranch, and that the rush of the braves down the range would be understood by the old ranchero—who, thus excited, might give yells of warning to the Mexicans, distant though they were, or even rush down the range to secure his horse, and gallop to the rescue of his wife—so fearful of such a movement, on the part of Mr. Saunders, was Carlos, that he at once bade the old man hasten into the cave, and inform Stella that the Comanches had halted; thus cheering the poor girl as much as possible.

Unsuspecting of the hidden object of the scout, the old ranchero instantly obeyed. He reached the cave chamber, where was his angelic daughter, her form revealed by the blazing torch above her, engaged in prayers for protection, and succor from the threatening dangers.

For a moment, the old man stood silent, gazing, with love and deepest apprehension, upon his child; while he recalled the dangers she had already passed through, as had been hurriedly detailed and explained to him by Carlos Cunningham.

Rushing up, he now clasped his daughter in his arms, she rising quickly from her knees when she heard his footsteps. She was, at first, terrified, but this expression changed to one of intense relief, as she sunk upon her father's breast.

At that very instant, there rung up the range, and echoed strangely through the cavern, a wild, horrible, and exultant yell. This was quickly followed by a series of deafening whoops from many throats.

Mr. Saunders turned pale as death, as did Stella; both clinging to each other in horror, and gazing into each other's eyes in silence.

This was but for a moment. Then the old ranchero sought to tear himself free, and rush to the entrance of the cavern; believing that the Indians had perceived the young scout, and that all was lost. But the maiden clung desperately to her father, uttering low moans, and striving, with earnest, pleading ejaculations, and all her strength, to detain him.

"Great Heaven! Stella, are you mad? Do you think me so base, as to leave that young man to defend the entrance alone? He will be slain, and then indeed we will be lost!"

Thus cried out the old ranchero, and no other words could he have uttered, which would have had more effect.

With a half-stifled shriek of fear and anguish, Stella released her hold, and the old man sprang from her, crying out, in a firm voice:

"Stay where you are, my child, and remain silent! We will defend the cave, as long as life lasts to either of us!"

But the departure of Mr. Saunders was here prevented by the sudden rush of Carlos, who clutched the amazed, bewildered, and for the moment terrified old man, and hurried him back to the side of his daughter.

A strange expression was stamped upon the face of the young scout, who was evidently greatly excited; and, for once in his experience, at a loss for words of explanation.

The truth was that, as he had apprehended, the Comanches had discovered the ranch, and the fleeing Mexican herders, which accounted for the exultant whoops, which had so startled Stella and her father.

The strangest feature of the discovery made by the Indians, however, was that every brave of the searching-party had rushed headlong down the range, and into the wash-out, all disappearing from view.

This unlooked-for abandonment of the search could only be accounted for, in the mind of the

scout, in one way; and this, he felt, was without doubt, the true solution to the mystery.

This was, that the savages, not having been able to find any trace of him and the ranchero, upon perceiving the two Mexicans galloping northward toward a ranch, had at once decided that they had been cunningly outwitted; and that these two horsemen were the same that they had been pursuing.

As the riders were headed away from the Indians, the latter would reason that, especially at such a distance they could not distinguish the white maiden, held in the arms of one of the horsemen.

That the Indians fully believed the distant riders to be the same two white men whom they had been pursuing, Carlos had no doubt.

If this was not the case, the savages would but a portion of them have gone in pursuit; leaving the remainder of their number, a party sufficiently strong to cope with, and capture their intended victims.

Hence, it will be understood that the young scout was in a most bewildered state of mind, hardly knowing what move to make.

Mrs. Saunders would be slain, and the ranch pilaged and burned, beyond a doubt!

It was just possible that he might be able to save the mother of Stella; but certainly not if instant action was not adopted.

Did the old ranchero know of the danger that now threatened his home, he would undoubtedly rush madly to her assistance, and his own death at the same time, without accomplishing any good.

Again Carlos did not see any chance of deceiving the old man, except for a short period.

He must so manage that Mr. Saunders should remain with Stella, while he hastened, on his fleet steed, in an endeavor to distance the Comanches, and convey the wife and mother to some safe hiding-place.

But, in what manner could he induce the old man to remain, the scout was at a loss to determine.

The ranch was doomed to destruction!

This was inevitable.

What was to be done to prevent the murder of Mrs. Saunders, must be done at once; and it was a most dangerous undertaking to gain the ranch, but Carlos had fully determined, ere he entered the cavern, that he would make the attempt.

Hence, it will be understood why the young man was in such a perplexed state of mind, when he sprang into the presence of those, whom he wished to know nothing of the real state of affairs. But he was not a man to remain long undecided, or at a loss, in regard to his mode of procedure; and, after but a moment or two of silence, he said, in a deep and impressive voice:

"Mr. Saunders and you, Stella, listen to me and mark well my words! You have, I trust, seen enough of me to know that you can depend upon my judgment in connection with defending you against these merciless Comanches.

"You are, I think, confident that I am capable of outwitting them, if it is among the possibilities. Now, do not interrupt me, or ask any explanations for the present.

"I will merely say that you are perfectly safe here. Not an Indian is now to be seen on the side of the range, but recently swarming with them. They have not even discovered our horses.

"Now, I am going down the range to reconnoiter; and I want you both, not only to pledge me that you will not leave this cave for at least a quarter of an hour, and even then, that you will not go beyond the entrance of it, or into the moonlight.

"You must give me your word to this effect, or what I am about to attempt may result in disaster and death.

"Whatever meets your view, when you do gaze out from the cave, you must promise me that the sight will not cause you to break your pledged word to me. Should you do so, all is lost; and both of you will be the victims of Comanche torture.

"I go to accomplish good. Trust me, and give me the required pledge; bearing in mind, that I confidently assert you are safe here, as long as you keep what I demand of you.

"Speak quickly, for life and death hang upon a moment's time!"

Very rapidly, but clearly and impressively, did Carlos Cunningham speak thus; but the old ranchero and his daughter, though greatly bewildered, had such trust in him, that they both at once gave the required promise.

Grasping the hand of Mr. Saunders, the young scout wrung it in farewell; and then, Stella, with tears in her eyes, sprang into his arms, crying out:

"Oh, Carlos, do not venture into danger! Our lives depend upon you. May Heaven watch over you!"

Hastily embracing the trembling girl, Carlos quickly placed her in the arms of her father; and then, with a farewell ringing from his lips, the self-sacrificing young scout darted into the darkness, and disappeared.

To say that the old ranchero was surprised, and that not for the first time during the night, at the strongly evinced affection manifested between his daughter and this young stranger, would be putting it mild. But, this time, he was perfectly astounded at Stella, who appeared to treat Carlos as tenderly as she could possibly have done, had she known him for years, and he had been an accepted lover.

But under the circumstances the old ranchero could not find words, nor bring himself to demand an explanation. He decided, however, that the young scout had done so much in the service of his daughter, that the latter, in her impulsive nature, was much more demonstrative than she would have been

in less exciting and dangerous scenes. He had, indeed, a suspicion that his daughter's mind had been affected by the horrors through which she had passed.

When Carlos had disappeared, Stella, her frame convulsed with hysterical sobs, clasped her arms about the neck of her father; and the old man seated himself upon a loose rock, and held her closely to his breast as he had done a thousand and one times since she was an infant.

Back and forth, the old ranchero swayed, in a soothing manner, as though he held in his arms a little child, Stella being now overcome with a torturing anxiety in regard to Carlos, who she now feared, had gone out from them never to return.

Naturally both Mr. Saunders and his daughter fell into a train of thought, in connection with the strange words, manner and request of the young scout, each being so impressed that the silence was not broken by speech for a long time.

Suddenly, however, Stella sprung from her father's breast to a sitting posture upon his knees, and cried out:

"Oh, papa, is not the time passed that Carlos mentioned? Cannot we now steal to the entrance and peer out? I shall go wild if we remain this way! We ought not to have permitted him to peril his life further in our service.

"What could he have meant? What was his object? I do not understand why he was obliged to leave the cave. His manner was strange, and he was evidently in great haste, as though much, even as he said, life and death depended upon a moment.

"I cannot understand his departure, his desertion of us at such a time; but mind you, I know his motives. They are good, for he is incapable of any but noble, brave and heroic deeds.

"Has not the specified time passed, papa? If so, do let us peer out for a moment, or I shall go frantic! I cannot bear this uncertainty; and the silence and gloom are depressing in the extreme."

Very rapidly, almost hysterically, did Stella Saunders speak, gazing nervously around the cave as she did so.

"Stella, my dear child," returned the old man, more calmly than he had spoken since joining Carlos in the race for life, and smoothing his daughter's hair tenderly as he spoke, "do not excite yourself. I think both of us have been so agitated by these fearful scenes and occurrences that we have been incapable of sound reason or action.

"We should undoubtedly have been slain or captured had it not been for the skill and coolness of Mr. Cunningham. This fact caused me the more readily to promise him that we would act as he requested.

"I have the utmost confidence in that noble young scout, and I know that you share that confidence with me. We would be lacking in the attributes which most ennoble mankind did we not trust him implicitly and regard him as our best friend."

"I am so glad to hear you say so, papa, for I must tell you I love him. Yes, I do, with all my heart and soul! I must do so, for he has saved my life, and that several times. But again I ask, is it not the time? Can we not look down the range?"

"My mind has been in such a sad state," said her father, "that I have not the remotest idea what length of time has elapsed since he left us. I have been, like yourself, much puzzled since I have begun to recall his strange words and actions. I am now almost convinced that he left us to accomplish some other daring deed, and one attended with great danger, for our benefit. But what it can be, I must say, a mystery."

"That has been just my conclusion, papa. Oh, do let us go to the entrance of the cave! I shall go distracted if I have much longer to endure this anxiety. I am positive that the time he mentioned has expired."

"Very well, Stella! We will do so."

Both now arose, and stole from the cave-chamber, along the dark passage. They soon reached the mouth of the cavern, where they halted, and gazed out over the moonlit vista.

This was only for an instant.

Then, with a piercing shriek, Stella sunk senseless at her father's feet; the old ranchero himself clutching at the rocks for support.

Deep moans of anguish broke from the lips of the old man, as he thus stood shuddering.

No longer was the exacted pledge of the young scout a mystery.

Could the ranchero keep that promise, and look out upon the view, now so terribly distinct—so suggestive of destruction and death, or horrors that were many times worse than death?

CHAPTER X.

THE RAID ON THE RANCH.

WHEN Carlos, the scout, sprung from the cavern, he felt greatly relieved at having the promise of Stella and her father, that they would remain in the cave such a length of time as would enable him, if successful in his proposed attempt, to reach such a distance on his self-imposed and perilous mission as would prevent the old ranchero, when he did look out from the cavern, from joining him. He would, at once, decide that it would be impossible for him to do any good, except by remaining with his daughter, and defending her, should any straggling Indians discover their retreat.

Carlos had, during the absence of the old ranchero in the cave, drawn the loads in the revolver which he had not used since plunging into the Rio Blanco after Stella. He had then wiped the cylinders out with care, and reloaded and capped

them; thus being prepared with twelve reliable shots, besides having his carbine.

Instantly upon the signal yell of one of the braves sounding, which had betrayed the fact to the war-party that the fugitives were discovered, Carlos had understood the mistake the Comanches had made; but which, did he not interfere, would be the cause of the torture and death of Mrs. Saunders, and the destruction of the ranch.

He knew well, that he could not prevent the home of the maiden who had become so dear to him, from being burned; but he hoped to be able to save the mother of Stella from the red fiends, now so insensibly eager for revenge.

Thoughts and plans flew like lightning through the mind of the young scout, as to what should be his plan of action, and in what manner he should deceive Mr. Saunders and Stella. In this he succeeded, as we have seen.

When Carlos ran down the range at a speed that was dangerous to limb, if not to life, he was satisfied that the Indians were all in the bed of the wash-out; and he congratulated himself upon the fact, that the savages had been so eager, and intent upon capturing himself, the old man, and the maiden, that they had not practiced their usual skill, in the search of the ground between the point where the horse left the gully and the *motte*; and, in consequence, they had not discovered Negro, and the steed of the old ranchero.

Had the animals been found by the war-party, the course of events would have been greatly changed; for, they would then have known that the two horsemen, riding toward the ranch, were not the men whom they had been pursuing.

No doubt, a portion of the war-party would, in that event, have galloped at once to capture the Mexican herders, and to destroy the ranch, but enough of them would have remained to have prevented him from going to the assistance of Mrs. Saunders, even had he been able to steal one of their horses for that purpose.

If he could, now, but get ahead of the war-party, and keep from their view, reaching the ranch in time to convey Mrs. Saunders to a place of safety, the discovery of the herders and the ranch would prove to have been a most fortunate thing; inasmuch as it had drawn the savages away from the range, thus securing the escape of Stella and her father.

It required but a few minutes for the young Texan to reach the foot of the range; and then, he bounded at once to the *motte*, being there welcomed by his noble steed.

At once adjusting the bridle, Carlos, with a few kind words to his horse, sprung into his saddle, urged the animal from the *motte*, and dashed at full speed up the foot of the range toward the north; having, by a sweeping glance, detected the most favorable course to pursue. This was a route over which he could speed parallel with the range, and still not be discovered by the war-party, who would also gallop in a course parallel, but further to the eastward.

The Comanches, after dashing down into the bed of the wash-out, and mounting their mustangs, would be forced to speed down the deep gully, easterly, for full half a mile, before they emerged from it, upon clear ground, and then turn north toward the ranch.

Had this not been the case, the time which Carlos spent in the cave, and in dashing down the range, would have been made use of by the Indians in speeding toward the two horsemen whom they had discovered, and the young scout would thus have been prevented from being of any service at the ranch.

In this way, matters were certainly providentially very favorable to him, and he had gained a position to the west of an elevation which was screened from the view of the Indians, as the latter emerged from the foot of the wash-out, and lashed their mustangs northward.

On dashed Carlos, within a short distance from the base of the range, keeping either a hill or a *motte* between himself and the war-party, and aiming to overtake the Mexicans, if possible, before they gained the ranch.

The young man did not wish to be seen, or recognized by the Indians, until he had gained a position beyond, and further north than the point at which they had discovered the two herders. Once beyond that, it was his object to reveal himself to the red pursuers, in order to convince them that the two horsemen, they had seen, were in reality, and beyond doubt, the men they had been in chase of.

Did they discover him, Carlos knew they would at once decide that their other intended victim, with the maiden, had spurred on to the ranch. To plan and maneuver toward this end, was the young scout's object, for this would insure the safety of the ranchero and his daughter, in the cavern.

Carlos, owing to the fitness of his steed, succeeded in gaining the point desired, without having been discovered by the Comanches.

Then he jerked rein, and sat his horse, gazing back over the open belt, at the avalanche of hideous war-painted braves, who, when they perceived him, gave vent to their joy and triumph, by far-sounding war-whoops.

Far ahead, just over a swell of land, Carlos saw the two Mexicans, and he was greatly relieved and rejoiced when they both disappeared on the north side of the elevation, and below the surface of the same; thus evading discovery by the Comanches.

It was evident to the scout, that the herders had made halt for some length of time, midway between the ranch and the wash-out; they, probably, having concluded that their employer and his daughter had been taken captive by the Indians,

and that they themselves were in no immediate danger. They would feel the more confident of this, from the fact that they did not believe the savages knew of their presence, or the location of the ranch.

The wild whoops had, however, startled the Mexicans, who, although plainly seen from the range, could not themselves distinguish human forms in the shades of the boulders and bushes.

Carlos drew rein only a sufficient length of time for the foremost Indians to gain a view of him, and recognize him as the slayer of their fellow braves, whom they had striven so long and so hard to capture. Then, as their vengeful yells proved that his object had been attained, he gave his signal whistle, and Negro sped on in the direction of Saunders's Ranch.

Soon, upon dashing over a swell of land, Carlos discovered the two Mexicans ahead. They were evidently mounted upon inferior horses, for they were driving spurs home at every bound, and yet not getting very great speed from the animals.

The herders were greatly terrified, it was plain; for the recent whoops of the red-men had proved to them, that the Comanches were coming toward them and the ranch at a headlong gait, and that their lives were in the most imminent danger.

The scout yelled loudly, and this caused the Greasers to redouble their efforts to urge their animals onward, by both quirt and spur. They gazed back in abject terror, for the Indians were now in full view after mounting the rise, and the ranch ahead offered them no protection, except for a limited time.

Then it was, that Carlos realized he would have, not only to force Negro to the top of his speed, but, even then, would have but a very limited time in which to save Mrs. Saunders, even was there a horse near at hand for the imperiled lady. Wishing to alarm the mother of Stella, and thus summon her to the door, in order that she might perceive her danger, and understand his object, Carlos clutched his carbine, and turning in his saddle, fired three shots in quick succession, aiming into the horde of savages behind him.

Although at extremely long range, the scout had the satisfaction of knowing that his bullets had not been thrown away; for one brave fell from his mustang, and the commotion produced indicated that two more had received wounds.

This caused the air to resound with the most fiendish yells and whoops, and these sounds, as Carlos had hoped, caused a female form to appear on the veranda; the lady seeming too terrified to move further from that position.

Quickly reloading his carbine, the scout circled his sombrero about his head, and yelled at the top of his voice; hoping that Mrs. Saunders would understand that she must immediately prepare for flight, and that he was a friend coming to her rescue. But she appeared to be incapable of movement, standing in the same position as when she first caught sight of the fiendish horde, who, she doubtless believed, had murdered her husband and daughter.

Indeed, the sight and unearthly whoops were sufficiently horrible to appall the stoutest heart, even of a man, thus situated, and render him incapable of defense or action, hopeless and despairing; especially if he beheld such a band of painted demons, befeathered and bedizened, circling their weapons in the air, and dashing headlong down upon him.

The terrified Mexicans paid not the slightest attention to Mrs. Saunders, and the scout noticed that the Greaser, who had been left with that lady to protect her, now ran wildly toward the corral; no doubt to secure a horse, upon which he could escape.

The conduct of the Mexicans, which was not strange, considering the circumstances, infuriated the young Texan; but he yelled in vain for them to halt, and join in defending Mrs. Saunders, who now seemed to comprehend his object; for she sprung from the veranda, and staggered out to meet him.

Her face was like that of a corpse, and her arms were thrown up beseechingly.

Carlos quickly fired his carbine into the oncoming horde, slung the weapon to his saddle-horn, jerked at the same time on the bridle-reins, and clutching the poor terrified woman, drew her up before him; at the same time, he gave his piercing signal whistle, which caused Negro to bound forward, as a cloud of arrows flew through the air.

These either fell short, or merely pricked the horse, and penetrated but slightly the clothing of the scout.

Carlos saw that it would be madness to continue on in such a mad race for life, now doubly burdened, after such a long run.

Quickly taking note of the surroundings, he perceived that the Greaser, who had run from the house to the corral, had not reappeared from the same. He reasoned, therefore, that there must be another gate in the rear of the inclosure. He also noticed, that quite a large *motte* of trees was in the rear of the corral. All this caused him to, at once, guide Negro directly into the inclosure, which he found to be of high oaken pickets, set firmly into the earth, side by side, in upright positions.

The moment that Negro sprung into the gate, Carlos yelled:

"Hold fast, Mrs. Saunders! I'll save you!"

At the same time, he threw himself from his horse, jerked a revolver, and then slammed the huge gate, barring it fast.

Another whistle caused Negro to bound to the opposite side of the corral, Mrs. Saunders maintaining sufficient strength and presence of mind to cling to the saddle.

Jerking his other revolver, Carlos stood, with a

deadly six-shooter in each hand, the thunder of a hundred hoofs sounding fearfully ominous, as the Comanche war-party now dashed their snorting and panting mustangs up to the corral pickets.

Then, over the tops of the pickets, appeared the feather-bedizened heads, the hideous, hate-contorted and war-striped faces, from which the black, snake-like eyes shot exultant glances; while yells, most horrible and unearthly, rung on all sides.

CHAPTER XI.

WITHIN THE CORRAL.

It was a terrible sight—that line of hideous, painted faces above the corral pickets—but it in no way daunted Carlos Cunningham.

Just the opposite, in fact; for he immediately realized that he held the Comanches, so long as they thus exposed their heads, at his mercy; while the savages were powerless to harm him, or Mrs. Saunders.

To explain this, however, we must state that the Indians, even mounted as they were, could but just raise themselves in their saddles sufficiently to elevate their heads above the tops of the line of pickets and peer over them. Consequently it was impossible for the red-men to use either bows or lances.

Probably, in their excitement and exultation, they did not at once perceive the disadvantage and great peril of their position.

The first object that caught the eyes of the Comanches was Mrs. Saunders, upon the scout's horse, the animal bounding to the opposite side of the corral. The next that attracted their attention, which to many was the last picture presented to them on earth, was the daring young Texan, just below them, a revolver in each hand, and his eyes blazing with the fire of battle and indomitable resolution.

Then rung that terrible revolver fusillade, while the leaden messengers of death crashed through the skulls of the painted demons.

A most horrible and demoralizing avalanche of death followed that terrible fusillade of the young scout, the savages for the moment being so dumfounded and appalled that they seemed incapable of crouching downward, even to preserve life.

Down, one after another, upon their frenzied mustangs, and thence to the earth, fell the victims of that fatal shower of lead, the prancing animals crashing their hoofs upon their recent riders, and casting into hopeless confusion such warriors as remained unharmed by the bullets.

Whoops of rage, rallying outcries, and most horrible howls for the dead, mingled with the frantic snorting and plunging of mustangs; and, as the last head disappeared from view above the oak pickets, Carlos whirled and dashed at a rapid run across the corral, his eyes sweeping the four sides of the inclosure with keen gaze, for life and death depended upon the truth of his conjectures in regard to there being another, a rear gate, to the corral.

To his relief, at the north-west corner, and next to the dense *molle* of trees, he discovered not only a gate, but saw that the same was wide open; evidently having been taken advantage of by the Mexican herder whom he had observed dash from the house to the corral.

No time was to be lost.

The Indians would soon recover from their dazed condition, brought about by the wholesale death that had for the time so astonished them, for the reason that they had not the slightest idea of meeting with such a reception; in fact, they believed that they had at last, the much dreaded scout in their power, and a white squaw as well; although the savages could see that the woman was not the same who had been protected and carried in that long race, up the Blanco.

Rapid were the movements of Carlos. He quickly led Negro from the corral into the dark shades of the *molle*, for some distance; he then reloaded his revolvers, standing meanwhile beside his horse.

"Thanks be to Heaven, and you, my brave preserver!" said Mrs. Saunders, in a low voice, which trembled with the intensity of her emotions.

"The savages have been, for a time, baffled; but, sir, I would really prefer death to the mental torture I have endured, this awful night!"

"I hardly dare ask you, sir, if you know anything of the Indians having any captives, or of their having slain any white people, to the south. My daughter rode to the Blanco, late yesterday afternoon; and, as she did not return, my husband went in search of her."

"May Heaven sustain me, in this my hour of dread terrors, far more awful than death!"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Saunders," returned the young man, in a low and cautious voice.

He was straining his senses, to the utmost, to detect the approach of the red foes.

"I should not now be here, had it not been that I met your daughter; for I knew of no ranch in this vicinity."

"You met my Stella? For mercy's sake, tell me! Is she—is my darling child alive?"

"Your daughter lives, madam; and is, for the present, in safety. Your husband is with her, in a cavern, on Devil's Backbone. I was forced to deceive them both, in order that I might come to your rescue. Neither of them knew that the Comanches were coming in the direction of their home, and that your life was in danger."

"The Indians discovered the ranch when they were up the range, searching for us. We had a terrible race for life, before reaching the cave."

"Now, you know everything. We are in very great danger, and God only knows what the end may be!"

"May He reward you!" said Mrs. Saunders, amid her tears; "may Heaven ever bless you for your

daring and disinterested services! You are a hero of heroes!"

The poor woman could say no more. She trembled with the depth of the emotions that ruled her.

Carlos, too, was greatly affected; but he instantly recovered, as he clasped the hand of the woman whom he had rescued from a terrible fate, but who was yet in danger most deadly, and himself as well.

"Say no more, Mrs. Saunders," he returned, in a hoarse but low tone; "I have done but my duty, and we are far from being safe now."

"Do not embarrass me by words. I shall do my best to save you; and I trust I shall be enabled to take you to your husband and daughter in safety. But, hark! What are those sounds?"

There was no need to listen; for as the scout spoke the night-air rung with terrific whoops of exultation, amid which came shrieks of deathly terror, despair, and horror.

"Oh, what does that mean?" cried out the poor woman, in quivering tones.

"It means, madam, that the red torturers have captured your Mexican herders, as I apprehended they would. The poor fellows are doomed!"

"There is no help for them. Had they joined me, they might possibly have escaped the awful fate in store for them. The infuriated Comanches will torture them, and us also if we are not prudent."

"My gallant horse has saved your daughter from death, by his speed, and saved me also. Whether he is able to bear us both, at a sufficient rate of speed to escape the red fiends, remains to be seen. Do not speak another word, Mrs. Saunders, or make the slightest movement. The red spies are in this

Carlos had led Negro into a dense thicket, which, he fortunately had discovered, was at one point free for a short distance from bushes; and into this small natural "open" he knew that no Indian could enter unperceived by him, on account of the dense growth of thorny shrubs and interlacing vines.

When the scout had hurriedly scanned the surroundings of the ranch, as he had galloped from the dwelling to the corral, after taking the wife of the ranchero up before him, he had seen that the *molle* was of considerable extent; and he believed that he could remain secreted in the shades of the same, could he but gain it, until Negro had somewhat rested from his headlong race, and without danger of being overpowered by any number of the Indians.

The Comanches, Carlos reasoned after his escape from the corral, had received a lesson from him that would cause them to be extremely cautious when again approaching his vicinity.

He had given them sufficient proofs of his skill as a marksman, to cause them to look upon him as "Big Medicine" in that line; and, consequently, they would now practice strategy to secure him as a captive.

The losses the Indians had sustained at his hands, Carlos well knew would cause them to make use of every artifice known to them, and to place their most cunning spies on his track.

As matters stood, they were furious for revenge; and nothing less than the capture and torture of the man who had slain so many of their braves would satisfy them. Of this the scout was confident.

Well he knew that there would be no abandonment of the search, after the wholesale manner in which he had shot down the pursuers and the warriors at the corral fence. Even while the night-air rung with the exultant whoops of the savages, and the piercing shrieks of the doomed Mexicans—even then the scout knew that within the shades of the *molle*, which had proved the salvation of himself and Mrs. Saunders, supple forms were crawling like serpents, searching here and there for him, while their bronze breasts were filled with murderous hate and a devilish desire for his blood.

Indeed, he had detected the presence of a red foe near the thicket which sheltered them, before he had warned Mrs. Saunders in regard to her maintaining strict silence.

Dark as could be imagined was it, in many portions of the undergrowth, but above the same it was twilight. Besides, at points, bars of moonlight shot and shone through the branches of the high trees, at places penetrating through the sward where the bushes grew less dense.

The shrieks of the wretched Mexicans and the whoops of the murder-mad Comanches drew nearer and nearer, approaching the ranch, where the terrified herders had been overtaken, or cut off from escape. But Carlos paid no attention to these sounds, his senses being now strained to detect dangers that threatened the mother of the maiden who had become so dear to him.

But Mrs. Saunders heard nothing but the sounds beyond the *molle*, and near her home—which latter she never again expected to enter—and her imagination ran riot as she pictured the well-known forms and faces of the poor Mexicans in the clutch of their red captors and being dragged to torture.

She expected soon to see the glow on the foliage, from the glare of her burning home and of all her household goods, but she felt thankful indeed that her husband and Stella still lived, and that through the same source—the skill and bravery of that daring scout—her own life had, thus far, been preserved.

While her mind was thus occupied, her blood became suddenly chilled with horrible apprehension; for quite near the point where she sat the horse of Carlos Cunningham, there sounded a great crashing and struggling in the undergrowth, mingled with a fearful panting and the clash of steel against steel.

Dazed with horror, trembling in every limb, and clutching at the saddle-horn for support, the af-

frighted woman strove to pierce the thick darkness that surrounded her.

Well she knew that her brave preserver, he who had saved her daughter from death, and upon whom her own life depended, was now struggling for the mastery with a Comanche brave!

Upon the result of that fierce struggle hung more than mere life.

The fate that would be hers, was too terrible even to contemplate.

The most deathly dread of those few moments would never be forgotten, should she live a thousand years.

And oh, what a length of time it seemed!

The panting of two strong men, who each was striving to let out the life of the other, and the grinding and clinking of steel in the darkness, were most horrible to hear, and caused the poor woman to suppress her very breath. Her eyes bulged from their sockets, although nothing but black darkness was before her; if one excepts the dread pictures conjured up in her mind by the situation and the sounds.

Finally these latter became of a different nature. She heard the plunging of steel through flesh and bone, the gurgling of a mortal in death agony, the spasmodic struggles of a dying man—of one dying a violent and torturing death, by a partial strangulation—then came the spatter of blood upon the leaves, as again sounded that marrow-chilling crunch of steel into a human breast!

Faint and sick with horror, Mrs. Saunders clung to the saddle. Silence, deep and profound, followed those dread sounds.

She listened intently. Which had been slain—the Comanche or the scout? Was she to be rescued or dragged to torture?

Naught but silence most sepulchral! Did death rule the thicket?

Where was the daring scout?

CHAPTER XII.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

Mrs. SAUNDERS shivered with horror.

The poor woman retained sufficient reasoning powers to feel assured, indeed to decide beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the scout, had he survived the terrible hand-to-hand conflict, would have at once sprung to her side, and relieved her mind. She felt that she was lost!

Soon the hellish fiends would, at the signal of some spy, who must quickly discover her, come yelling through the shades, and drag her to torture; even, perhaps, in the flames of her own home!

The cessation of the vocal din beyond the *molle* and corrals, during the, to her, terribly agonizing single combat so near her, was not understood by Mrs. Saunders; although it impressed her as strange, especially at that particular time, when other and nearer sounds were created, thrice more torturing, as her more than life was at stake.

To describe the horror and anguish, the hopeless despair and dread, that fairly drove the unfortunate woman to the borders of insanity, after the sounds of that terrific duel had suddenly become hushed to a silence that was dreadful and ominous of a fate she dared not think of, would be beyond the power of words to express.

That silence was simply terrible; and it appeared to last, she knew not what length of time, but it seemed to her hours. In reality it was but a minute or two. Then she became conscious of other sounds—a stealthy crawling of some living thing amid the bushes, toward the very point where the combat had been waged.

Mrs. Saunders trembled and feared she could not maintain her position in the saddle; so, slowly she crouched, half-lying upon the same, being impressed even in the intensity of her terror with wonder and admiration at the remarkable stead of the scout. For the noble horse stood as if transformed to stone, seeming to suppress its breath, as if aware of the importance of silence, although but a short time previous he had been panting laboriously from the over-exertion caused by the rapid run from the Rio Blanco.

Only for a moment did thoughts of the faithful and intelligent animal occupy the mind of Mrs. Saunders, for that terrible creeping, that sly and cautious rustling of the bushes, now claimed all her attention.

And that almost-continuous sound came nearer and nearer, until she, in the intensity of her horror, would have shrieked aloud had not her faculties been almost paralyzed.

Finally, so intense was the poor woman's emotion and so powerless did she become as she clung desperately to the saddle—for the dread sounds were nearly at the spot where stood the horse—that she fell from the least with a low, despairing cry.

Yet, as the poor woman struck the earth, she realized that the danger she was in was now doubled; that escape by flight on the horse had been made impossible, for she was now too weak and faint to make the effort.

For all that she did not lose her senses, and she heard, as an echo to the sound of her own fall, a crash in the bushes, as if some heavy body had been hurled or had hurled itself upward and forward, falling and crushing all beneath it. There was only one grain of consolation in this new sound. It was no nearer to her position than the recent crawling sounds which she had heard.

Then the thought flashed upon the mind of the almost-distracted woman that another duel was impending. This was soon made evident.

But now the sounds of conflict gave Mrs. Saunders hope—awful though they were—for she reflected that if an Indian had been approaching her posi-

tion, attracted by the noise of the first combat, he had now met a foe, and they were engaged in a struggle which must end only in the death of one or both of the desperately-contending pair.

And as the savage had met an antagonist, who could the latter be but a white man? Who, but that brave young man to whom she already owed her life, and the life of her darling child?

Now it was, after thus reasoning, that the poor woman began to understand why the scout had not stolen to her side, to relieve her terrors, after he had successfully combated the Comanche spy. He had, at once, detected the stealthy approach of another red foe, and he dared not stir from his position, nor make the slightest noise, for fear of betraying his whereabouts.

But little time had Mrs. Saunders to reason upon the situation of affairs, for the struggle in the border of the thicket was brief.

Again she heard those horrible sounds; the clanking of steel, the plunging of the same through flesh and bone, and the spurting of blood over the bushes, followed by the gasping and gurgling, as of a mortal in the death-agony.

Again came that awful suspense, that momentary silence so suggestive of terrible probabilities; and then, to the intense joy and unbounded relief of Mrs. Saunders, she heard the voice of the young scout, speaking in low, assuring, and solicitous words.

The next moment, she felt herself grasped in the strong arms of Carlos Cunningham, and placed once more in the saddle.

She could not speak. Tears relieved her overtaxed brain, and she sobbed like a child.

"Calm and cool, are the words now, Mrs. Saunders! I know this is a fearful ordeal for you to bear; but, believe me, it is nothing to what we are striving to escape.

"Do not speak, but hold fast to the saddle. This place is getting too hot for us, and we must change our position. I do not feel justified in leaving the ranch, without an attempt to rescue those poor herders from the dread doom that threatens them; but I do not now see my way clear to assist them.

"As you may have presumed, this *motte* has been surrounded by a line of Indians, who have been waiting for us to appear, in an attempt to escape. I have succeeded in killing two of the spies, and the way is now open for us, toward the range.

"I know you are anxious to join your husband and daughter, and we will soon make an effort to do so. The main portion of the war-party have been plundering your home, which accounts for the cessation of the whoops and yells. They will soon fire the ranch. They have no idea that it is possible for us to escape; but they intend to inspect the *motte* in force, and to capture us in a short time.

"Be brave and calm, and we may, with God's help, escape. If you manifest fright or weakness, you will only pain and confuse me, and thus lessen our chances.

"Believe me, Mrs. Saunders, I shall do all that man can do, under the circumstances, to unite you and your husband and child.

"Compose yourself, then, and bear my words in mind. Come, Negro! You are worth more than your weight in gold to us."

Hardly above a whisper were these words spoken, and in a rapid and impressive manner. As Carlos ended, he led his horse slowly through the thicket to the westward; clutching his revolver, and ready for any foe who might bar his way.

At the very moment that Negro stepped free from the dense thicket, there shot out on the night air the terrific whoops of the war-party, in a most startling manner.

Carlos halted, and spoke:

"Look back, Mrs. Saunders! Your home is in flames, and this is a fitting moment for our attempt; for the red demons will dance around the burning dwelling, which will for a time claim their attention. Do not think of the house, but be thankful you are not in the power of those merciless fiends!"

The poor woman was unable to utter a word in reply, even had she not been cautioned to silence.

Carlos led Negro to the extreme western point of the *motte*; but, before reaching the border of it, he uttered an ejaculation of satisfaction, and made halt.

Before him stood a fine half-breed horse saddled and bridled, evidently the animal that the Mexican had secured from the corral; but upon which he had not been able to gain a great distance before he was cut off by the Comanches, who had been detailed for that purpose.

The steed had, without doubt, hurled its wounded rider to the earth, when the Indians had shot him; for spots of blood were plainly to be seen upon the saddle. It had then stampeded toward the ranch and into the *motte*.

"Mrs. Saunders, this is most fortunate! Here is a good horse for you, fully equipped. Allow me to assist you to a change of animals. This increases our chances of escape."

"Oh, thank you! But indeed your very tones give me hope. Will you not tell me your name? I have not heard you mention it."

"I am Carlos Cunningham, at your service, Mrs. Saunders! Now, let us mount, and away!"

Soon they were free from the *motte*, and at the head of a gully; the corrals being between them and the Comanches.

Quickly the horses were led down the bed of the wash-out, which, after some fifty yards, curved toward the south; and, in the space of fifteen minutes, they were climbing up the east side of the same, which was not very steep, and had on the verge of it a thick clump of bushes.

The sky was filled with smoke, and a lurid glow

shot upward, as Mrs. Saunders could readily see; but her burning home was not within her view, the bank of the gully preventing it from being seen. Carlos saw it, however, and his teeth became set, and his features stamped with fury, at the sight.

From the number of Comanches whom he saw, dancing and yelling around the burning ranch, the scout knew that he had been correct in regard to there having been a considerable number of warriors, who had remained in their camp, when the dash of a portion of the war-party had been made to the Blanco Falls; and that a number, if not all, had joined their comrades in the raid upon the ranch. He estimated that there were fully two-score of braves around the flames.

Carlos had climbed up the side of the gully, for the purpose of reconnoitering, to ascertain what disposition had been made of the Mexican captives; but the first glance told him plainly, that all opportunity to attempt their rescue was lost. That the poor herders had been wounded, and brutally treated, at the time of their capture, he had been confident; but, as he caught a view of the conflagration, he saw at once that the vengeful fury of the savages had been too strong to spare the captives, until their distant village had been reached.

Just opposite the dwelling were three small trees, and to the trunk of each, a Mexican was lashed; after having been divested of his clothing by the fiendish savages.

The wretched herders were now actually being roasted alive, and the horrible sight caused even Carlos the scout, who had witnessed many dread torture scenes from covert, to become sick and faint. Harrowing though the awful sight was, yet the young Texan lingered; seeming chained to the spot by a horrible fascination—the attraction of repulsion. For the time, he lost sight of the fact that Mrs. Saunders was below in the gully, and must be extremely anxious, as well as terrified at the infernal din.

And that which soon followed, caused Carlos to think that a just and merciful God had chosen a most fitting moment to prove his power, and to punish those who disgraced and dishonored the form in which they were created.

This sudden and unlooked-for event was, in consequence, not only startling, but awful and tremendous; for, while the victims were shrieking, and the Comanches whooping and dancing, the earth and the very heavens shook with a thunderous explosion; and the Saunders Ranch flew, in burning fragments, in every direction! The very trees, to which the poor victims of Comanche cruelty had been bound, were shattered and uprooted, and the fiendish torture was ended!

And all around lay dead and dying savages, some torn to pieces, while shrieks from others filled the night-air. Mustangs stampeded in frantic fright, and many braves rolled on the earth in agony, their hair and feathers in a blaze!

It was a most terrible scene—a scene to baffle description—and Carlos rushed down the side of the wash-out, sprung into his saddle and catching the neck-rope of the horse upon which sat Mrs. Saunders, he gave his signal whistle.

The poor woman was appalled at the explosion, and at the pale and startled face of the young scout. She was totally at a loss to understand what danger threatened them that could cause Carlos to be thus moved—he who had been calm and collected amid such fearful perils.

She clung to the saddle-horn, closed her eyes and prayed most fervently, while the scout guided the horses from the gully, and urged them south toward the Rio Blanco.

This was also in the direction of the point on the Devil's Backbone where was the cavern in which he had left the old ranchero and his darling Stella.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WATCH ON THE RANGE.

THE scene that had been spread out before and below Stella Saunders and her father as they reached the entrance of the cavern was not only most startling but agonizing to them.

Both had at once understood why Carlos, the scout, had insisted upon their promising that they would remain in the cave-chamber.

He had, previous to entering it, seen the Indians rush down the side of the range, and knew that they had discovered the ranch and the two Mexican herders.

Resolved to make an attempt to rescue Mrs. Saunders, and believing that the old ranchero in his anguish would not listen to reason, but would insist upon hastening to the relief of his wife—which would force the scout to remain and defend Stella—he had, it was now evident, formed a plan that would enable him to reach a point beyond recall, before they should have become aware of this new departure of the Comanches.

Both the father and daughter had, at once, seen the two herders, lashing their mustangs toward the ranch, the young scout in their rear, and behind them all the scattered horde of savages, flying like leaves before a gale, and filling the night air with whoops of exultation and most vengeful meaning.

Like a flash, the thought that the ranch, and the much-loved mother and wife, were doomed, darted through the minds of the father and daughter. And not only this, but that the noble scout, who had braved death for them, and who was hastening to rescue the one most dear to them—he, too, seemed fated to lose his life in their service.

Indeed there seemed no possible way for him to escape the yelling fiends in his rear; much less to be of any assistance to Mrs. Saunders.

The poor old ranchero was so overcome, that, for the moment, he clutched at the rough rocks at the

side of the cave entrance, swaying back and forth; unconscious of the presence of his senseless daughter at his feet, while he stared out upon the harrowing scene.

Plainly, and at once, he realized that he was helpless to aid his wife; even to the extent of lifting a hand to save her from the merciless red-men!

The young scout had read him aright, for Mr. Saunders well knew that, regardless of all danger, and without the slightest judgment, he would, upon understanding the object of the Indians, have rushed madly down the range. The result of such an action on his part, would have been, that he would have been slain before he was half-way to the ranch.

Carlos Cunningham had, without doubt, this time sacrificed his life, in an endeavor to prevent the savages from capturing Mrs. Saunders. So reasoned her husband.

And on, toward the ranch, toward the roof that sheltered one with whom he had traveled life's trail for many long years—on sped the paint-daubed demons, on their errand of death and destruction—while here, at his feet, lay his angelic daughter, senseless, and ghastly as a corpse!

No wonder was it, that the occurrences of that dread night, and the probabilities of the next hour to come, caused the old man to groan in mortal anguish; and, at last, to sink down by the side of his darling child, and fold her senseless form in his arms.

However, the ranchero gave way to his great grief but a short time. Then he chafed the hands of Stella, begging her to speak to him; for he felt that his overtaxed brain would give way, did he not soon hear her voice.

Far better would it have been for him, had he fallen senseless, and remained in that state, beside his daughter; for, such were his emotions, so concentrated had been his gaze toward his ranch and the war-party, and afterward upon Stella, that he saw not a half-dozen braves who now stole up from the wash-out with the evident intention of witnessing the success of their brother warriors.

Doubtless these Indians had been a portion of the number that had been left to guard the camp; and, knowing by the whoops that an important discovery had been made by their fellow braves, they had advanced to the range for the purpose that has just been mentioned.

From rock to rock, the hideous savages sprang upward, making no noise with their moccasined feet—moving stealthily from habit and not from having any suspicion that there were enemies in their vicinity.

Directly near the shelf and cave these braves halted, gazing silently toward their comrades. Soon their keen ears caught the sounds made by the old ranchero as he strove to bring his child back to consciousness.

Instantly the Indians sunk into the shadows, and with quick gestures, made known to each other their interpretations of the sounds and location from which they proceeded.

Young braves they were, or they would not have been chosen to remain in the rear to guard the camp and extra mustangs, and, as they became aware of the presence of whites near them, all were intensely eager to distinguish themselves. It was a favorable opportunity for their advancement, and it required but a moment's reasoning for all of them to decide, that they had accidentally happened upon the very whites who had evaded capture by the experienced warriors of the party, and who had slain several braves.

To capture these would indeed be a feather in the fillet of the ranking braves, and would place them all in a favorable footing on the war-path.

Thus exulting, the Comanches crawled to the shelf, and then along the same, until near the entrance of the cavern. It was at this moment that Stella recovered and was assisted to rise to her feet, by the old ranchero, who, while so doing, perceived to his horror, the crouching savages!

Jerking his revolver on the instant, its report mingled with the shrieks of Stella, and the death-howls of the Comanches. But, the next minute, Mr. Saunders and his fair daughter lay bound upon the rock, although three of the braves were gasping in death near the mouth of the cavern.

The old ranchero had been knocked senseless by a blow from his own revolver, which had been wrenched from his grasp by one of his assailants, while another caught him by the throat, and the third wound his arms about the horrified maiden, who, believing her father to be killed, relapsed into insensibility.

Thus lay the father and daughter, side by side, pale and motionless as corpses.

Most certainly did it seem, that the Fates had decreed destruction and death to the old ranchero, his dear ones, and all his belongings!

Bound, senseless, and in the power of merciless Comanches, while a war-party of the same hideous fiends were speeding toward his ranch, with fiendish yells; hastening where but a helpless woman would be found, with none to stand between her and death by torture, except the lone scout!

Little cared the surviving young braves for the death of their comrades, for this would give them prestige, and honor, and advancement.

Had the capture been bloodless, not one-half of the honor would they have enjoyed. Besides, those who had been slain, had died with arms in their hands, and would be transported to the happy hunting-grounds without disgrace, for their scalps were still upon their heads.

Never were three young braves, on their first war-path, prouder and more exultant, than the survivors of this little party. They quickly bore

their dead comrades into the cavern, and laid them, side by side, in the middle of the rock-bound apartment—a temporary tomb.

Then returning, one took Stella's limp form in his arms, and proceeded carefully down the difficult descent; followed by the other two braves, bearing the still unconscious old man. Down into the head of the wash-out they went, and proceeded thence, along the bed of the same to the outlet, to clear ground. Soon after, this successful trio entered the camp of the war-party, within the shades of Purgatory; which, upon this occasion at least, was most appropriately peopled.

A signal whoop from the young brave who carried Stella in his arms, caused six or eight others to bound from the borders of the camp, giving vent to ejaculations of wonder, as they discovered the captives. Assuming the air and authority of superiors, the three young braves ordered their fellows to at once prepare stakes, and plant them in the middle of the camp. This was soon accomplished.

Then the old man and his daughter were bound, in standing positions, to the stakes, and their captors began immediately to take measures to recover them; they evidently wishing to make the most of their opportunity, by having the captives, not only in a prominent position in the camp, but in possession of their senses, when the war-party should arrive.

With this view, they dashed water copiously upon them, and at length they both revived.

A groan of despair came from the lips of the old ranchero, but poor Stella seemed to be incapable of speech or motion. Her eyes were fixed upon the painted braves in horror, and her breath came and went like the gasps of the dying.

Surely there was no ray of hope for them, and the deep moans that burst from the old man's lips fully attested to his anguish and despair. Death, he would have considered welcome, had it not been for his poor tortured child; and the sufferings of the pair, caused taunt and jeer, as well as many a suggestive gesture, from the young braves.

"Stella! Oh, my poor darling! We are lost! lost! lost!"

Thus cried out the old ranchero at last; he staring at his daughter with the look of one who was gazing upon a loved one's corpse—his voice unnatural and strange, his eyes starting and glassy.

But poor Stella seemed to hear him not. Her face was upturned, and her long hair nearly veiled her form to her waist. Her eyes were fixed upon the starry heavens, while slowly her colorless lips muttered prayers.

"Father in Heaven, are we forsaken by Thee?"

Thus cried out the old man, in his agony.

The Indians kept at a respectful distance from Stella, with something of superstitious awe in their glance and expression, while one muttered:

"Heap bad medicine, go near white squaw. She talk with Good Spirit. Waugh! Heap bad. Chief want white squaw. She got good scalp."

But we must leave Stella and her father, in their most fearful position—both of them suffering torture of mind, far beyond the comprehension of any one not thus situated—and return to Carlos Cunningham, the only hope of the Saunders family.

Stella and her father had no hope whatever, that either the young scout, or the loved wife and mother were now alive; hence their most terrible mental torture, in that connection, caused them to lose sight of their own deadly peril, and even to have but little desire to survive the loved and lost.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DREAD DISCOVERY.

AND on, away from that awful explosion, away from that shattered ranch, from the terrible scene, that he had witnessed, galloped Carlos Cunningham, with the horse, upon which poor Mrs. Saunders clung desperately, in the lead. He spoke no word. Indeed, for a time, he seemed oblivious of the presence of the ranchero's wife.

The young scout believed, that Mr. Saunders and Stella had witnessed the explosion from the mouth of the cavern; and that they would think the loved wife and mother had been killed, or burned to death in her own home.

Considering the terrible strain that both the old man and his daughter had upon their minds previously, Carlos feared that they might be rendered insane, by their well-grounded suspicions as to the terrible consequences of the tremendous explosion. This, the scout assumed, must have originated from quite a quantity of gunpowder, which had been stored in the dwelling.

Such was the prostration of Mrs. Saunders, and her agonizing anxiety in regard to her husband and daughter. She believing that the whole country was swarming with Indians—that she could only gaze, in a dazed way, westward, along the rocky range, in the hope of discovering her dear ones.

The headlong speed, kept up by Carlos, rendered speech, unless by yells, short and sharp, almost impossible; and besides, the scout maintained a position, which was full ten feet in advance of the horse ridden by Mrs. Saunders.

After leaving the ruined ranch behind, and having the satisfaction of knowing that he had rescued Mrs. Saunders; then the mind of the young man naturally reverted to the angelic girl, whose anxiety, as well as that of her father, he hoped so soon to relieve.

And, not until the mind of the scout began to dwell upon this subject, and those whom he had so unconsciously left at the cavern—deceiving them for their own good—not until half the distance from the gully to the ranch had been gone over, did it oc-

cur to Carlos, that the Comanches would, naturally, have left a portion of their party to guard the camp.

If such had been the case, which was probable, might not some of those, thus left, become alarmed at the terrific explosion, and rush up the range, in order to get a view in the direction galloped by the war-party?

Carlos well knew, that the old ranchero and his daughter would have left the cave soon after the Comanches had caught sight of himself; and that those whom he had deceived must have viewed the race, but could not have understood what had transpired at the ranch, except that it had been burned, and blown to atoms by the explosion.

The startling sights and sounds would greatly anguish the minds of the old man and maiden, and perhaps cause them to lose all caution in connection with their own safety.

These thoughts caused great anxiety and apprehension in the mind of the young man, which was soon to increase, and with sufficient ground. Did the Comanche guard rush up the side of the range, after the explosion, to gain a view in the direction of the ranch, when the braves might discover the cavern, or be warned of the presence of the young girl and her father, by some indiscretion on the part of one or the other, in word or action?

The old man might show himself on the shelf, and be discovered by the lurking Indians, who would then see that their comrades had been outwitted, and that the maiden, who had evaded capture so many times, was near at hand.

Such thoughts made the scout extremely anxious; and, as he shot frequent glances to the rock-shelf, fixing his gaze upon the entrance to the cavern without detecting the slightest evidence of any living presence there; then he became exceedingly anxious and worried, using his spurs freely, and keeping at headlong speed.

As he drew nearer, and could see nothing of either the old ranchero and his child—both of whom would naturally be out on the rock-shelf—then a great and harrowing apprehension, a dread of more horrors and awful happenings came upon Carlos; and he set his teeth, drove spurs, and congratulated himself upon having ridden so fast that his companion could not question him. Thus he had been enabled to avoid giving any information in regard to the exact location of Stella and her father, and why they did not come forward to welcome the wife and mother.

Could it be possible that the old man and his daughter had fallen asleep in the cave?

Carlos would have been relieved greatly could he have believed this to be the case.

He felt assured, as his noble steed galloped up to the *molle* near the head of the wash-out, that something was wrong.

Most certainly Mr. Saunders had not galloped to the ranch, for his horse was still in the *molle*. The scout at once decided that it would not be prudent to leave Mrs. Saunders below the range. Straggling savages were liable to be in the vicinity, and might even then be watching him and the woman who was with him.

No; Mrs. Saunders must go with him to the cavern.

Hastily securing the horses within the *molle*, the scout assisted Mrs. Saunders to the ground, bidding her in a low voice to be prudent, ask no questions, and come with him.

The poor woman was, however, too bewildered to talk, and was evidently greatly terrified, expecting that the wild war-whoops of the Indians would sound at any moment—the manner of Carlos not tending to allay her fears.

Taking her hand and assisting her up the range, the young scout feeling the dead load at his heart increasing at every step upward, he hastened in an unreasonable manner, at times nearly carrying Mrs. Saunders in his arms over the more dangerous places.

The ascent, to the poor woman, seemed more like a flight from some dread danger than aught else, and this increased her fear and anxiety.

Soon Carlos placed his charge upon the rock shelf, and bade her follow along it. Then he sprang up himself, and in his impetuosity—now almost convinced that something terrible had occurred—rushed past Mrs. Saunders, nearly falling from the shelf. His eyes were fixed, and staring at the dark entrance to the cavern. What was before him?

Upon that shelf stood no overjoyed husband to welcome his wife from the jaws of death, no angel maiden, to clasp her arms about her mother's neck, and mingle tears with one as from the dead; then turning to him, and calling down blessings upon him, as their preserver, while from her glorious eyes shone the love-light for which his heart so craved!

This, which he had expected—indeed he at first had no doubts in regard to such a reception—was not to be. The shelf was bare! The entrance to the cave was black, silent as death, and unoccupied!

With a bitter groan, Carlos rushed into the gloomy passage.

He had forgotten that Mrs. Saunders was behind him; or the agony and dread apprehension, which had taken possession of him, was too strong, too intense, to allow him to entertain any other feeling for the time.

The slight glow from the now nearly extinguished torch, guided the young scout on his way; and in a moment he stood at the entrance to the cave chamber.

Then he cried out, in a voice that startled even himself.

"Mr. Saunders! Stella! Oh, Stella! Where are you?"

His words were thrown back in his teeth by

strange and unearthly echoes. Then all was silent as the tomb.

Mrs. Saunders, speechless, and nearly breathless, with almost insupportable agony of soul, caught at the rough rocks in the rear of the scout, trembling, and faint with dread.

The words and manner of Carlos proved to the poor woman, but too plainly, that the joy she had anticipated, in being reunited with her husband and child, after such horrible happenings, was but despair the most deathly!

Thus the unhappy, tortured woman stood, in the darkness; her breath suppressed, faint, and sick, and with a dread horror that was unendurable, except for a limited time—so intense and prostrating were her emotions.

Carlos Cunningham sprang forward, and grasped the torch; whirling it about his head, until it blazed out afresh. Then he inspected the gloomy cave-chamber.

No form was in view!

He held the torch low, to the very floor.

It was only for an instant, but that was sufficient to reveal the blood-stained, paint-daubed, hideous corpses of the three braves.

Mrs. Saunders saw the dread sight, and sunk limp and senseless, on the rock floor of the passage.

The young scout flashed but one glance at the demon dead; then, with a yell of mingled pain and vengeance, he whirled the torch across the chamber, and groping his way to the entrance of the cavern, rushed like a madman down the rough side of Devil's Backbone; leaving, although in his agony of mind he knew it not, the poor mother of Stella Saunders, outstretched and ghastly upon the floor of the cavern, and as devoid of sense and motion as the frightful corpses of the trio of Comanche warriors, that lay near her.

CHAPTER XV.

HOPE'S FULL FRUITION.

WITH the frenzy of a madman Carlos, the scout, rushed down the rough, rocky side of Devil's Backbone, and dashed into the dense *molle*, in which he had left his fleet and faithful steed, the gallant Negro, by whose super-equine exertions both the young Texan and Mrs. Saunders had been saved from death.

Stella, too, had been saved by the noble beast; but she was now in the power of the infuriated Indians.

The absence of Mr. Saunders and his daughter from the cavern, and the ghastly evidences left behind, proved this, beyond all manner of doubt.

The scout thus reasoned instantly, and as rapidly acted upon the conclusions he formed.

He was positive that braves had been left behind by the war-party to guard their camp.

There could be no doubt of this, as he was well satisfied that none of the war-party had returned, after once starting on their headlong dash toward the Saunders Ranch.

That some of those who had thus been left behind had advanced up the range for the purpose of gaining a view of their comrades in the mad gallop of the war-party north, he was well satisfied. Indeed, there was no other possible reason to account for the capture of the old ranchero and his daughter, and which had not been accomplished without loss to the savages.

The old man had fought desperately for his child, and for his own life. Had either of them been wounded?

The scout knew that they had not been slain, as in that case their corpses would have been either in the cave or on the rock shelf.

Never before had man battled more desperately, maneuvered more cunningly, or practiced more skill, to save the lives of others, than had Carlos Cunningham!

Never before had mortal man met maiden who had so thoroughly and deeply filled his whole heart and soul as had been the case with the young scout upon meeting Stella Saunders.

Had he then risked so much for her and hers, had he in so short a time learned what it was to live and love, only to lose the angelic girl for whom he would have risked life a thousand times—for whom he would gladly have bartered all that he held most dear, even life?

Was that beautiful maiden, so fair and innocent, to be tortured—to be condemned to a worse fate than death—by the inhuman red fiends who had already been the cause of such misery and suffering to her?

Was that brave old man, who so loved his child, to be racked to the soul by the anguish and horror of his darling when in captivity, and then himself to be tortured to death before her eyes?

No! A thousand times, no!

Thus cried out Carlos, even in a loud voice, for desperation now ruled him, a desperation and an indomitable and frantic rage and thirst for revenge upon the red foe, that was simply terrific in its intensity.

Woe to the braves that stood between him and the maiden who had so recently become a part of his very life!

He had saved Stella once, and he would do so, Heaven helping him, again!

Neither should those painted fiends torture the brave old ranchero.

Carlos raised his clinched hands in the air, and swore this, as he bounded into his saddle.

Negro arched his neck, pricked his ears, and, with flashing eyes and pawing hoofs, was ready for another mad race.

The camp of the Comanches was within the shades of Purgatory. Of this there was no doubt in the mind of the young scout.

Neither had he any doubt in regard to where the captives had been conveyed.

Both were in the Comanche camp. Both were now suffering tortures that were terrible to contemplate, not only hopeless and despairing in regard to their own condition, but agonized at the thought of the almost certainty of the fearful fate that had befallen the wife and mother.

There could not be many braves in the camp; but Carlos, as the thoughts and conclusions recorded flashed through his mind, cared not if a thousand barred his way, for he felt, in his grand and just rage, that he could cut down the whole war-party with his strong right arm—that the God of justice would nerve and sustain him to this end.

Whirling Negro, the scout, his eyes blazing and his face contorted, shot out his signal-whistle to his faithful steed, and the noble horse dashed from the thicket, plunging down the side of the steep "wash-out," and then up the bed of the same. At the outlet of the gully Carlos alighted and examined the clayey soil, uttering a cry of relief and satisfaction as he once more sprung into his saddle. For the small party of braves with their two captives had turned toward the south, while the war-party had entered and emerged from the gully from the north-east.

Not only this, but the braves with the captives had been on foot, as Carlos had observed; and their trail proved unmistakably all that the young man could expect to gain, in information connected with his friends.

Only the direction of the trail could be noted, and that for a short distance, then it was lost in the dry, parched grass. But on, like an arrow, shot Negro, until the dense shades of Purgatory were reached. Then the scout sprung to the earth, and led his animal onward, frequently halting to listen.

And Providence guided him aright; for, before many minutes, he had the relief and joy of discovering through the bordering screen of bushes, the Comanche camp; and, in the center of the same, bound to stakes, those whom he sought. The sight was truly agonizing.

Carlos felt persuaded that stragglers of the war-party were liable to arrive at any moment; and that, at once, all would hasten with their captives westward, as if the fiends of their traditions were in chase. Instant action must be taken.

The young scout prepared himself quickly, for his charge into the camp, and the release of the unfortunate and suffering captives.

With revolver in one hand, and his bowie in the other, with teeth set, and muscles drawn, Carlos Cunningham sent out his piercing whistle, and Negro bounded from the bushes into the camp!

With one far-sounding yell, the scout dashed toward the captives, in a mad charge, driving spurs as never before; at the same time his revolver vomited fire and lead, a brave falling to the earth at every discharge, shot through the brain.

So totally unexpected and unaccountable was the dash of a white man into the camp—and he, one whom they believed to be in the power of their fellow warriors—that the braves were almost paralyzed.

At the first yell, Stella looked up; and, as she saw the daring young scout dashing to her rescue, her face lighted up on the instant, while her father fairly yelled, in the intensity of his joy.

Quick, almost as thought, were the movements of Carlos, the Scout.

He slashed loose the bonds of Stella, as he sprung to her side, and placed the bridle of Negro in her grasp, shouting:

"Stand firm, darling! I will save you!"

He then dashed to the side of the old ranchero, and cut the cords that bound him; at the same time, crying out:

"Run, Mr. Saunders! Run, and jump into my saddle! I'll pass Stella up to you."

"Spur directly to the wash-out, and thence to the *motte*! Wait there until I join you, for the red fiends shall not have my scalp."

"Ride for life! There is no time to lose!"

Carlos hurried the old man to the side of Negro, as he thus spoke, assisted him into the saddle, and then placed the young girl in her father's arms. At the same time, he clutched his carbine from the saddle-horn, and again gave out his shrill whistle.

Just then, the feathered shafts began to fly through the air, and the scout yelled:

"Spur! Spur for life! Remember, the gully and then the *motte*!"

And away bounded the gallant Negro, with his double burden, into the dark shades of Purgatory; poor Stella shrieking out, for Carlos to follow them!

The scout ran backward, firing as he ran, the young braves not daring to follow him into the shades, many having uttered their last war-whoop, as the bullets of the young Texan tore through their brains or hearts.

And the old ranchero spurred fast to and up the wash-out, impressing his daughter with the fact, as they rode, that Carlos would evade the Indians, and would soon join them.

Soon the father and daughter reached the *motte*, and sprung to the earth, both of them intensely anxious in regard to the safety of their deliverer. But their minds were soon relieved, for Carlos dashed into the *motte*, his face begrimed with powder, and Stella rushed into his eager arms.

"Mrs. Saunders is alive and safe!" cried out the young man breathlessly, he panting from his terrible exertions and hasty flight.

It was all that he could say, but that was enough to cause the hearts of his listeners to throb with relief and gratitude. But, so filled with concern and self-condemnation was Carlos, at having left the fainting woman in the cave among those

hideous corpses, without a word of explanation to her, that he cried out again, as he grasped the hand of Stella:

"Come! Come, my darling! Come, Mr. Saunders. We would be as merciless as those savages, did we linger here, while your poor wife is suffering so on your account!"

In a few words, he then explained all the occurrences at the ranch, and the circumstances connected with the rescue of the lone woman so dear to them; and who had been so very near to a horrid death. This was, as they climbed up to the shelf.

When they neared it, both Stella and her father, being speechless from their emotions, were greeted by a voice which they well knew; greeted, in an outcry that expressed mingled joy, relief, and thankfulness.

But, kind reader, it would be impossible to describe that happy reunion, after such most terrible experiences. They clung to each other, and all, amid their tears, were profuse in calling down blessings on the head of him to whom they owed their preservation and safety.

Ere long, the mother and daughter were sleeping the sleep of weariness and exhaustion, Carlos seating himself upon a rock near them, and Mr. Saunders following his example.

And, then and there, as the scout and the old ranchero sat thus—the corpses of the Comanches lying inside the cave, and the survivors of the explosion shooting along the foot of the range, toward their camp—Carlos Cunningham asked Mr. Saunders for the hand of his daughter.

We need hardly say, that the request was not only granted, but that the blessing of the old man went with it to the brave young scout who had so many times risked his life for him and his.

And bright and happy was the dawning of the day to those whom we have followed through such trying scenes.

The sun that, to Stella Saunders, had set in sorrow most deathly, arose most brilliant, grand and glorious, and promising a long day of happiness, as did the new light that beamed in the eye and on the face of Carlos, the scout.

Never again will the Comanches approach the near vicinity of Saunders Ranch, after that terrible explosion, and the death and wounds then received.

Thus had the young scout asserted, and as his word was now law with the old man, the ranch was rebuilt and in a more substantial manner, and three months later Stella Saunders became Stella Cunningham.

Carlos was the happiest man in Blanco county, his beautiful wife as happy as he, and the old father and mother little less so.

Many dark and bloody trails did the young scout follow in the after days, during the terrible Indian wars; but never was his heart so racked with anguish, and his frame more nerved for battle; nor did he ever ride a better, or more fleet, steed than Negro, on that terrible night, when he met his fate in the waters of the basin below the Blanco Falls!

There Carlos Cunningham met the angelic maiden, in so strange a manner, who was destined to be his wife, and for whom he was destined to battle most heroically.

And often did Carlos and Stella ride to the falls of the Rio Blanco, to view the sunset from the very point where the two Comanches had swooped down so suddenly, causing her startled steed to bound from the rock platform, down into the dark depths of the Blanco; which would have proved a watery grave for Stella, but for

CARLOS CUNNINGHAM, THE SCOUT.

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